



Gorham's Bluff: From View to Vision

The instant allure of Gorham's Bluff is obvious: the view is spectacular. Hundreds of feet below, the mighty Tennessee River cuts a wide green valley through the landscape. Birds of prey circle over Coon Gulf, a smooth body of water brought about when the Tennessee Valley Authority dammed the river in the 1930s. It is almost impossible to stand at the edge, take everything in—the sheer scope and mass and immensity of it all—and not be dazzled. And it is easy to ascribe that feeling to sheer, raw natural beauty. But that is just a fraction of what makes Gorham's Bluff so compelling.

First, there's the plate tectonics, the enormity of geologic time it takes for land masses to collide and form mountainous ridges, for a river to chew through a valley, for rain and wind and fluctuating temperatures to erode the sedimentary rock until it becomes a sheer face that lords over the landscape. But more than the physical features, there is the human history of the land. Indigenous peoples, likely forebears of the Cherokees, inhabited this region as many as seven thousand years ago. All things being equal, they were probably not so different from us, and archaeologists and folklorists tell us they may well have been drawn to the bluff for religious and cultural ceremonies, recognizing its powerful hold on the human imagination.

In the more recent past—1892, to be precise—the U.S. government deeded eighty acres at the core of today's Gorham's Bluff to Confederate veteran W.B. Gorham, or "Uncle Billy" to anybody who knew him. No one knows why he came or when he first happened upon the bluff for himself. Mostly what's left of Uncle Billy is lore about all the things that made him different from everybody else. He built his family a lean-to shack that was so remote, his wife and children moved down into the valley, unwilling to cope with the loneliness and isolation. He received a soldier's pension, which meant he had shoes when no one else could afford them, and he was known for growing fat, heart-red strawberries.

Once, two young mischief-making boys plotted to sneak up on Uncle Billy to see if they could get a rise out of him. As they slid through the tall grass toward his cabin, they heard music and voices. Unaccustomed to hearing the sounds of life and festivity coming from Billy's place, they crept a little closer, not sure what

they might see. Standing in the clearing was the solitary figure of Uncle Billy, playing his fiddle and calling an imaginary square dance.

Yes, there has always been something special about Gorham's Bluff, just as there has always been something unique about the people who are drawn to it.

A little over a century later, the land belonged to Clara and Bill McGriff, who had purchased it over time from Clara's father. For the McGriffs, Gorham's Bluff had always meant Saturday afternoon trips out to Picnic Rock at the edge of the bluff, a time for their vast network of extended family to stay connected. In the summer of 1992, they began thinking about exploring other possibilities for Gorham's Bluff. The McGriffs included their daughter, Dawn, then an Atlanta-based marketing consultant, in the conversation. The challenge was how to make something happen at Gorham's Bluff that would augment—and not detract from—its power and natural beauty.

Enter the burgeoning movement of Traditional Neighborhood Design. Towns like Seaside, Florida, and Kentlands, Maryland, started cropping up in the 1980s, catering to a growing segment of people who were disenchanted with some of the byproducts of suburban life. Traditional neighborhoods like Seaside and Kentlands sought to address feelings of disconnection and isolation by reincorporating the best features of a close-knit small town community. Narrow, tree-lined streets slowed down automobile traffic and made things safer for pedestrians and playing children. Architectural design principles emphasized clean, classic lines in both the individual houses and in the overall streetscape. Porches were prominent. The ultimate aim? Fully integrated, holistic communities in both form and function.

Seaside in particular sparked the McGriffs' imagination for a couple of reasons. First, Seaside's pristine beaches seemed analogous to Gorham's Bluff's view, and Seaside's founders made a commitment early on to preserve community-wide access to their town's defining natural feature. Just as important, Seaside sought to integrate a thriving arts culture in the community. A few phone calls led to Chris Kent, then the real estate broker at Seaside, who fleshed out the details of what traditional neighborhoods were all about. He, in turn, introduced the McGriffs to New Orleans-based architect and planner, Lloyd Vogt, who used an unassuming, professorial manner to teach them all about how the best neighborhoods have always been defined by a seamless interlacing of history, culture, and architecture. Finally, on October 28, 1992, at the kitchen table in Bill and Clara's nearby home in Albertville, Alabama, Kent, Vogt, and the McGriffs spent an intensive weekend sketching out an honest-to-goodness town plan. The journey had begun.

Development: Phase I

Subdivisions go up quickly; towns take time. And patience. Gorham's Bluff has been no exception. Now old enough to have identifiable stages of development, the town has had two distinct eras. The earlier era – from the idea

stage in the early 1990s to 2001 – saw its share of the ebb-and-flow of excitement and activity.

In the summer of 1993, construction started on the first home in Gorham's Bluff, the stately Appalachian. Architect Lloyd Vogt incorporated all the Traditional Neighborhood Design features to create a signature look for the town. The Appalachian's shaded, L-shaped front porch and the screened-in outdoor pavilion in the backyard underscored the value of families and neighbors relaxing together in a communal space. A tower room afforded a scenic view of the town and its natural surroundings, allowing easy access to the "view therapy" that is so prevalent in Gorham's Bluff.

Construction of The Lodge on Gorham's Bluff dominated daily activity for fifteen months beginning in April of 1994, and its operation has been a central facet of life in Gorham's Bluff since its opening in 1995. Word of mouth and a *Southern Living* magazine feature in September of 1996 created a steady stream of new and returning guests. The Lodge has been an important means of helping people discover Gorham's Bluff ever since. Utilizing the same guiding design principles as The Appalachian, all six of the Lodge's rooms feature stunning overlook views and its back porch provides an ideal setting for small impromptu gatherings or some time for quiet reflection.

Three years after the Lodge opened, another signature building came to occupy a prominent place in the Gorham's Bluff landscape. But this building was already built. The Jackson County Board of Education was constructing a new high school in nearby Pisgah to replace the 1938 neo-classical structure that housed the secondary grades and was an axis of community in the small town. The old building—where both Bill and Clara McGriff had attended high school—would be demolished to make room for a parking lot. The contractor who won the bid for the demolition work approached the McGriffs to gauge their interest in purchasing salvage materials from the school—particularly the beaded board ceiling and wainscot and the heart pine floor, all of which were still in good condition. Upon closer inspection, while the building had certainly seen better days, it was clear that the quality of materials and construction had held up well over time. Instead of scuttling the structure, they decided to move the entire building, in several sections, to the heart of Gorham's Bluff. Now reassembled and partly refurbished with a new roof and new bricks on the outside of the building, it stands as a fitting symbol for the integration of tradition and progress, which is a hallmark of the Traditional Neighborhood concept. While there is still more to be done, the school has a prominent role in the town's future as a community arts and activities center.

Adjacent to the Pisgah School is another important place for community gatherings: The Gorham's Bluff Meeting House. Completed by 2001, it took its place among the other bellwether buildings of the town's early years. A Vogt design like The Lodge and The Appalachian, its cathedral ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows, and excellent acoustic features create a dramatic space for bi-weekly

non-denominational church services as well as a variety of meetings, performances, lectures, and community arts workshops.

The Institute: Early Years

As some of the town's signature buildings were being constructed and, slowly but surely, people began buying lots and building homes, the town's non-profit arts organization was taking shape. From its inception, the Gorham's Bluff Institute has been dedicated to providing arts and cultural activities to a three county area (Jackson, Dekalb, and Marshall) in northeast Alabama. Its mission is to make a significant contribution to the artistic and cultural development of the whole community, not only to foster arts appreciation but to give people in the area ample opportunity to become active arts practitioners themselves. In so doing, it also seeks to showcase the work of Alabama artists and to introduce artists and art forms to northeast Alabama that might not otherwise reach its audiences.

Like the development itself, the Institute has proceeded in fairly recognizable phases. Early on, the focus was building a performance space that could accommodate a wide range of artistic productions – theater, dance, and musical concerts. The outdoor Amphitheater was actually one of the first structures completed in Gorham's Bluff – it even predates The Lodge. By incorporating the existing trees and rock outcroppings into the design of the structure, the Amphitheater is a testament to the rejuvenating power of both the arts and the natural environment. And when the two come together, the combination can be an unforgettably electrifying experience.

Many of the Institute's biggest successes – especially in its formative years – have done just that. The Amphitheater's first engagement was a production of the Hume Cronyn play, *Foxfire*, cast with area actors and directed by New York University professor Joe Warfield in the summer of 1994. Shortly thereafter, the Institute assumed sponsorship of the Gerhart Chamber Music Festival. With the Gerhart Festival, the Institute jumped with both feet into the business of producing large events that appealed not just to the Gorham's Bluff community but to the entire tri-county area. Gerhart had been a fixture in northeast Alabama for a generation prior to the Institute's involvement. The partnership not only continued Gerhart's longstanding tradition of bringing in top-notch classical musicians who had performed in some of the world's most prestigious concert halls, it established what would become the Institute's signature event in its early years: the Concert Under the Stars. Combining a gourmet meal for two hundred guests with stellar performances by world-class musicians and the exquisite natural beauty of a midsummer bluffside evening, the Concert Under the Stars helped establish Gorham's Bluff as a bona fide arts and cultural center in northeast Alabama.

Not long after the Gerhart Festival was in the programming fold, the opportunity arose to establish another extended residency in Gorham's Bluff. This time, the partner was the Alabama Ballet. It was a bold – even improbable –

idea: establish a week-long summer dance residency in Gorham's Bluff to expose the state's premier dance company to an audience it did not ordinarily reach while giving the company a chance to stretch its artistic repertoire outside the crucible of its Birmingham studios. One small hitch: there was no place in Gorham's Bluff for the dancers to rehearse and perform. Instead of waiting for a performance center to be built, the Institute and the Ballet decided to improvise. In July of 1998, a temporary stage was erected underneath a massive tent at the edge of the bluff, leaving plenty of room for an audience of over one hundred people to enjoy both a performance and a gourmet, white-tablecloth meal. Necessity had proven to be the mother of invention. The intimacy of the bluff-side tent coupled with the panoramic view to create a one-of-a-kind experience for dancers and audiences alike.

Encouraged by its successes in producing large-scale arts and cultural events in the first few years of its development, the Institute soon incorporated a storytelling festival into its programming schedule as well. Nationally renowned tellers tapped into the region's centuries-old oral tradition to inspire audiences with the power of narrative. The storytelling festival was also instrumental in the development of ARTSACCESS, the Institute's arts-education outreach arm. Tellers visited area public schools for assemblies and workshops, and soon dancers and musicians were also visiting local schools and libraries in conjunction with their visits to Gorham's Bluff. In many cases these outreach activities provided the first—and only—significant exposure to these art forms that area schoolchildren received.

Development: Phase II

The current phase of Gorham's Bluff's development began in mid-2001. Certainly there had been successes up to that point – there were twenty-five homes built, along with an important group of core structures like the Lodge and the Meeting House, and acquiring the Pisgah School building had been a serendipitous stroke of good luck. Likewise, the Institute had established relationships with a wide range of artists and area constituents, and it had begun to forge relationships with area public schools to fulfill its arts outreach mission. Still, the overall pace of development had been sluggish at times, and the enterprise as a whole needed an injection of new ideas and energy.

That injection came in the form of a community-wide charrette. A charrette is an intense, focused architectural planning session. The first move was to consult with Steve Mouzon, principal of Mouzon & Associates Architects & Traditional Town Planners in Huntsville. Under the guidance of Mouzon, who took on the role of Gorham's Bluff Town Architect, the town hosted seventy-five like-minded souls who were all believers in the Traditional Neighborhood movement and who were drawn to the unlimited potential of the project. Compensated only with a place to sleep and four meals, an impressive group of architects, planners, developers, writers, and educators came to Gorham's Bluff

with remarkable enthusiasm. The slow pace of development was actually an advantage in attracting such knowledgeable, committed voices to the charrette because it provided a nearly blank slate – as did the lack of county-wide planning regulations. Even more advantageous, the existing group of lot- and homeowners could add some invaluable residential perspective into the process – what was working about the town as well as what could work better. During the concentrated, forty-eight hour session, the Meeting House buzzed with activity, as small groups here and there sketched and drafted and hammered out a new direction for the town. Mouzon refined the results of the charrette in less than a week so that it could be ready to take to the Congress for New Urbanism's ninth annual conference in New York the following weekend. Armed with feedback from a conference roundtable, Mouzon and the developers traveled home to unveil the completed new plan for Gorham's Bluff.

In the end, the process identified four significant revisions. First and foremost was a new conception of Main Street. The initial plan consisted of a main thoroughfare in Gorham's Bluff lined with large estate homes in the time-honored tradition of a picture-postcard, small Southern town. Here is where theory bumped into reality. That original vision – and the charming sense of neighborhood intimacy it promised – relied in no small part upon a completed streetscape on the west end of Main Street. After nearly a decade of experience in marketing the town, however, one thing was clear: until the more desirable bluff lots were sold, it would remain difficult to generate a substantial investment in town lots. What's more, there was general consensus that Main Street lacked drama in the original design, slipping quietly into the town center and out again, ignoring altogether the Pisgah School and its symbolism – tradition and community, renewal and progress. The revised plan redirects Main Street so that the school's signature cupola is the geographical focal point as you approach downtown from either direction. The larger homes flanking Main Street in the original plan gave way to cozy two-story homes on more compact lots, to make Main Street a viable option for energetic young professionals and families.

The next significant alteration to the plan involved a better informed melding of theory and practice yet again. A truly integrated neighborhood that values community and tradition must have a prominent place for its elders. The original plan called for an Independent and Assisted Living facility on the south side of town, next to a sports park which would, in theory, encourage intergenerational activity. Our charrette brought forth another approach: move the elder residences closer to the heart of downtown. Not only would that underscore the town's desire to be a fully intergenerational community, there would likely be an important practical benefit as well. The services and amenities typically included in Independent and Assisted Living centers – restaurants, a hair salon, a library, clothing and retail shops, a general store – can be expanded to serve the entire town, increasing the commercial viability of the town center.

The third change in the town plan was aimed toward a somewhat different age group. It entailed scrapping the idea to dam Parton Branch on the east side of

town, thus turning what would have been East Lake into what will now be Shepard Park. The park will not only preserve the meandering creek, it will leave intact several acres of picturesque hardwood forest and create a play area for kids. To start the park off in the right direction, Birmingham architects Jeff Dungan and Louis Nequette – with the able assistance of several Gorham’s Bluff children and grandchildren – designed the Shepard Park tree house. Completed in 2002, it has proven to be a favorite destination for kids of all ages ever since.

Finally, perhaps the most resounding observation from the 2001 charrette had to do with the town’s commitment to the arts. While the Gorham’s Bluff Institute had often worked miracles in pulling off programs through ingenuity and sheer determination, a town that aspires to being an arts center must make a tangible commitment to building viable arts facilities. The new town plan takes that observation to heart. A large open-air performance center will occupy the crest of downtown Gorham’s Bluff, creating a permanent space to blend the magic of the arts with the bluff’s majestic view. What was going to be a workshop district is reimagined as a quad that will include artist and student residences and a black box theater. West Lake is incorporated as an arts venue as well, with the addition of a shell that will direct musical performances across the water. In short, the new town plan takes every opportunity to reiterate the fact that Gorham’s Bluff is a place where artists and the arts should feel right at home.

The Institute Evolves

If the town plan reflects Gorham’s Bluff’s head, the Institute is its heart. More often than not, successful organizations and people keep head and heart working together. So as the town refined its goals, it made sense for the Institute to take an objective look at what it was doing well and what it could do better, all with the goal of helping Gorham’s Bluff fulfill its potential as a sustainable, energetic community that values the arts. For most of its first decade, the Institute focused its programming on large summer festivals.

While these events have provided some of Gorham’s Bluff’s most memorable moments, they tended to produce a great flurry of activity for a relatively short period of time. For all the good that came out of those flurries, they did not exactly reflect the town’s core values of relaxation and sustainability. Likewise, if the arts are going to be a part of the fabric of a community, four to six weeks of programming out of every year, no matter how intensive, is probably not enough. With that said, arts administration can be time-consuming and costly, and – like all non-profit arts agencies – the Institute has limited resources. Maybe the greater challenge was to somehow produce more programming throughout the year, but to do it in a way that fit seamlessly into the natural rhythms of life in Gorham’s Bluff.

The resulting shifts in the Institute’s approach to programming and administration have been subtle, but they have produced profound results. Over the past four years, from 2003 to 2007, the Institute has successfully moved to

year-round programming by staging smaller events that utilize existing performance spaces in Gorham's Bluff – namely the Amphitheater and the Meeting House. These smaller, more frequent events allow for a wider variety of performances, helping the Institute do a better job of upholding its mission to celebrate regional artists and art forms while also introducing new artistic experiences to area residents.

Another new direction for the Institute has been developing a program of community arts workshops. Typically offered over the course of one to three days during a given weekend, workshops offer Gorham's Bluff homeowners as well as members of the community at large the chance to immerse themselves in a variety of art forms, from photography and pottery, to creative writing and yoga.

ARTSACCESS has evolved as well. The Institute still looks to partner with area schools and libraries to provide arts and educational opportunities to a community that sorely needs them, especially for young people. Where in the past, a great deal of effort and energy was spent bringing programs to schools and libraries in outlying areas, the focus now is to bring students to Gorham's Bluff, thereby providing access to facilities they need but cannot access elsewhere. The Institute periodically sponsors Community Arts Showcases in Gorham's Bluff, which provides a high-quality, centrally located performance venue where student-artists from area schools and community colleges are able to entertain audiences of friends, family, and neighbors. Likewise, the Institute has partnered with the Jackson County school system to sponsor the Jackson County Math Tournament on site, providing space and volunteers for the only educational enrichment event of its kind in the entire county. And discounts on tickets for area students, elders, and teachers to attend events in the Sunday Performance Series provides another layer of arts outreach that broadens and deepens the range of cultural activities that are available to the community.

The sustainability of this organizational approach is evidenced not only in the success of the individual programs themselves but in the support the Institute has received from a wide range of organizations and individuals, both local and statewide, public and private. The Alabama State Council on the Arts, the Southern Arts Federation, the Alabama Humanities Foundation, and the Daniel Foundation of Alabama have all supported Institute activities in the past, and the Institute has made considerable strides in growing its list of individual members in recent years.

From Vision to Community

In short, Gorham's Bluff has emerged from its formative years with a sense of purpose and promise that is both informed by its past and invigorated by its vision for the future. Not only is a thorough, sustainable plan in place – one that is based on solid shared values and experience – that plan is now coming to fruition, step-by-step, lot-by-lot, house-by-house. The East Bluff Community Swimming Pool and Pavilion is a hub of community activity from Memorial Day

to Labor Day. The Institute offers a wide range of activities year-round that help Gorham's Bluff homeowners actively participate in the arts in a meaningful way. The foundation is here.

Of course, a living, breathing community isn't just buildings and high-minded ideals. It's people. People who want to be a part of something extraordinary. People who value connections – to place, to friends and family, and to neighbors. The greatest treasure in building a small town is that it belongs to every person who is a part of the process. Each individual perspective, each set of memories and stories, adds texture and richness to the fabric of the community, creating a shared legacy that is even larger than the sum of its parts. Collectively, it is our relationships and experiences that breathe life into a vibrant community. Those who choose Gorham's Bluff not only choose a beautiful, relaxing place to build a home. They choose a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become an integral part of shaping a community identity that can be handed down from one generation to the next.