

More than a year after closing, Historic Westville tourist attraction on track to reopen

BY MARK RICE

A popular tourist attraction in Columbus that [closed 18 months ago](#) due to financial issues is on track to reopen.

[Historic Westville](#), a living history museum that demonstrated 19th-century Southern culture, has raised about \$750,000 to jump-start its reopening, Westville board chairman Thornton Jordan told the Ledger-Enquirer. With an annual budget of nearly \$500,000, the money will give the museum a full year of operation to start.

An anonymous donor has pledged to match every donation up to \$5 million for an endowment in a donor-advised fund at the [Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley](#), Jordan said.

No date is scheduled for the nonprofit organization's reopening, he said, but it probably will be in spring 2025.

Securing such funding makes Jordan grateful for the community's support and optimistic about Westville's future.

"It certainly sweetens the kitty," he said. "... At this point,



Damascus Methodist Church, seen here in 2021, is among the historic structures at Historic Westville in Columbus.

it's a matter of me going back to the top 50 donors on the original campaign and see what kind of response we get. ... This is a very generous town. ... The worst possible outcome is to walk away from their investment."

Why Historic Westville closed

The Ledger-Enquirer [reported in September 2021](#) that Westville was struggling financially after being closed for several months due to the COVID-19 pandemic and reopening in October 2020 with coronavirus protocols in place.

Westville not only was deal-

ing with decreased ticket sales but also paying the \$9.5 million cost of [moving its 17 historic buildings](#) from Lumpkin, about 40 miles south of Columbus, which was completed in June 2019.

Those moving expenses were over \$2 million higher than originally estimated, Jordan said, and proved too much to handle. Westville's temporary closure in March 2023 became what then was thought to be [permanent in February 2024](#).

"It broke my heart when I heard that Westville was going to close, and at that point it looked like that was the end of



Westville is rebuilding its village on South Lumpkin Road near the Oxbow Meadows Environmental Learning Center and National Infantry Museum. The village is a living history museum that portrays a 19th-century west Georgia town. The village will have more than 30 restored antebellum buildings.

the story,” said Jordan, who was on the Westville board for about 30 years, from the 1970s through the early 2000s, before helping form the new board several months ago. “... The overages just depleted us.

“We couldn’t afford to open, didn’t have enough cushion to make that work. But the idea, to me, of walking away from it is the worst possible outcome for all parties concerned. ... Let’s back it again. Let’s get it up and running, and everybody wins.”

How reopened Historic Westville will be different

Westville plans to hire a new executive director who will work toward filling out the rest of the staff, Jordan said, which will be downsized from 14 when it closed to 11 (two full-time, nine part-time). This will include the

artisans in period dress demonstrating crafts such as blacksmithing, woodworking and sewing.

When it reopens, Westville will operate two days per week (Fridays and Saturdays) to start, he said, and would add a third day if the visitor numbers show that’s feasible. Westville was open four days per week when it moved to Columbus, but that schedule was cut to three days per week to save expenses, Jordan said.

Trying to find new ways to encourage youth to find joy in working with their hands other than on their cellphone, Jordan wants Westville to conduct contests awarding visitors who demonstrate excellence in the traditional crafts of the 19th century.

And although folks didn’t have air conditioning in the 19th century, Jordan said the reopened Westville will compromise extreme authenticity in favor of comfort for visitors and staff, so air conditioning is coming to at least some of those historic buildings.

The Westville board also is considering renaming the village to mark a new era for the living history museum.

“Westville still will be the corporate name,” Jordan said, “but we just think, since it’s a new place, a new venue and a new start, maybe a change of name would work.”

Synergy with nearby attractions

Making him more confident about Westville’s future, Jordan emphasized the opportunity to capitalize on the synergy of being located less than a mile from the [National Infantry Museum](#), which gets 200,000 visitors per year, and the [Columbus State University Oxbow Meadows Environmental Learning Center](#), which gets 75,000 visitors per year. He mentioned the possibility of the three attractions creating a jointly discounted ticket for overall admission.

“We’re all in the same little family, little cultural group,” he said. “So we have a very modest goal. We hope to get 25,000 visitors the first year (at the reopened Westville). ... I mean, the reasons Westville moved to Columbus are still good reasons.”

ons.”

Jordan noted Columbus/Muscogee County’s population is approximately 200,000, compared to Stewart County’s 5,000. During the 10 months Westville was open after it moved from Lumpkin to Columbus, it attracted around 17,000 visitors, he said, compared to its peak in Lumpkin of about 50,000 visitors in 1989, with school groups comprising around 40% of that total.

Jordan insists Historic Westville still is a worthwhile enterprise.

“These are 17 authentic, furnished buildings (on 27 acres),” he said. “This is the queen of historic preservation. It’s here. It’s intact. It’s ready to be re-born. Why would you not want to support that?”

VisitColumbusGA president and CEO Peter Bowden, who is a Westville board member, praised Jordan for reconstituting the board and generating interest from donors to fund its reopening.

“It’s no easy task, but I’m very hopeful,” Bowden told the Ledger-Enquirer. “When it closed, there were so many things that changed (for visitors in that area). With the National Infantry Museum and Oxbow Meadows, it was an anchor. It offered a unique experience. ... So when you were marketing something like Westville, that had to stop, and we saw many groups that had to be turned away. ... But now, with Thornton’s leadership, the



Historic Westville, seen here in 2021, in Columbus.

board all seems very dedicated to making this work.”

Also helping Westville is having the Columbus Consolidated Government agree to continue leasing the land off South Lumpkin Road for \$1 per year, Jordan said, as long as Westville continues to pay its \$36,000 annual premium for a \$1 million insurance policy. That’s offset by the \$24,000 per year Westville receives by subleasing the adjacent 126 acres to an RV park, he said.

But the clock is ticking. To keep this deal with CCG, Jordan said, Westville must show viability by December 2025, meaning it operates in the black and without debt.

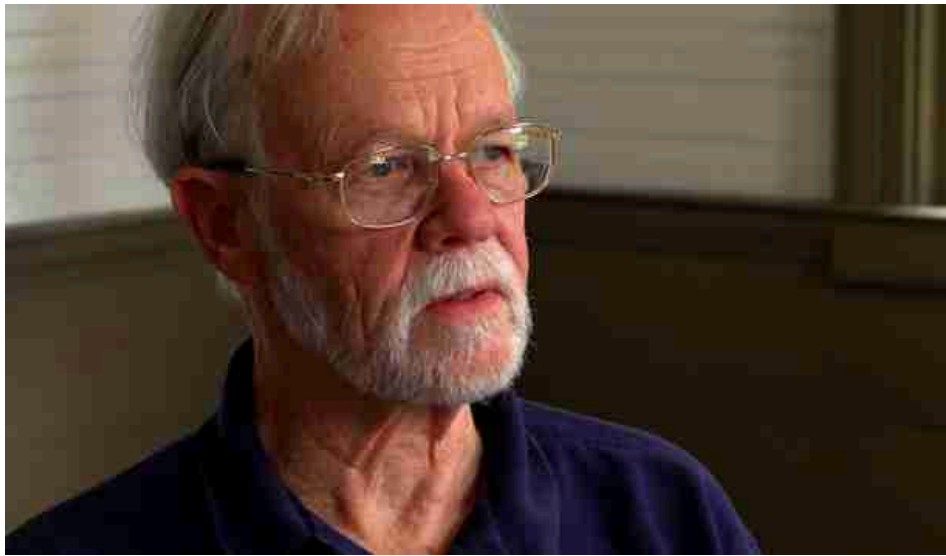
“If we get to that deadline,” he said, “I’m certainly going to ask the city to extend it because the contract says the city would take possession of the land, and we would be required to move all the buildings and artifacts off of it.”

Columbus deputy city manager Pam Hodge told the L-E in an email Thursday, “Negotiations are currently ongoing between the City of Columbus and Westville. We hope to reach an agreement soon to present to City Council for consideration that will allow them to continue their mission.”

Historic Westville board members

Here are the Historic Westville board members:

- Thornton Jordan, retired Columbus College (now Columbus State University) associate professor of English
- George Singer, TSYS
- Peter Bowden, VisitColumbusGA
- James Hall, attorney
- Col. Andy Redmond, National Infantry Museum Foundation
- Miles Jordan, The Bottle



Thornton Jordan is the chairman of the board at Westville in Columbus.

Shop

- Mike Dentzau, Oxbow

Meadows

- Jhai James, Springer Opera

House

- Ben Brannin, CPA.

Jordan listed the following community leaders as informal advisers for the board: Frank Brown, Rex Whiddon, Will White, Otis Scarborough, Jack Key, Cecil Cheeves, Cameron Bean and Warren Steele.