

# Arkansas Town's New Owner Has Visions of Its Renaissance

By [KIM SEVERSON](#) JAN. 19, 2014



One of the original Wilson family houses will be a temporary location for a small private academy. Credit William Widmer for The New York Times

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WILSON, Ark. — The little farm towns here in Delta cotton country spin by, each rusting grain silo and boarded-up discount store fading into the next.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, comes Wilson, a collection of Tudor-style buildings with Carrara marble on the bank counter, a French provincial house with Impressionist paintings hanging on the walls and air-conditioned doghouses in the yards.

Wilson was once the most important company town in the South. It sits amid 62 square miles of rich farmland, most of which was once controlled by Lee Wilson, a man almost everyone called Boss Lee. He built his fortune off the backs of sharecroppers and brought Southern agriculture into the modern age.

For 125 years, the Wilson family owned this town. It ran the store, the bank, the schools and the cotton gin. For a time, the Wilsons even minted their own currency to pay the thousands of workers who lived on their land. Bags of coins still sit in the company vault. After the town incorporated in the 1950s, a Wilson was always mayor.

But now, the town — home to 905 people — is under new management, which plans to transform the civic anachronism into a beacon of art, culture and education in one of the poorest regions of the state.

It might seem a far-fetched notion, except that the man who bought it is Gaylon Lawrence Jr., 52, whose extensive financial holdings include more than 165,000 acres of farmland in Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas and Mississippi; five banks; the world's largest privately owned air conditioning distributor, USAir Conditioning Distributor; and a major citrus operation in Florida.

Mr. Lawrence, a tall, can-do kind of man, who prefers to check his fields and watch the sunset than speak with reporters, had long coveted the storied Wilson land. It is one of the largest contiguous agricultural tracts in the Delta, its soil fed by the Mississippi River.

In 2010, when the Wilson family descendants were finally ready to sell, he bought it for an estimated \$110 million, fulfilling a dream he shared with his father, now deceased. It just so happened that it came with a fading Tudor town that was losing its population.

“At first you are thinking, ‘How can I get this off my back?’ ” Mr. Lawrence said in an interview in the living room of one of the homes he owns in Wilson. “But then you look around and think how can you be a catalyst? I can’t really say I am the boss. I say I am here to help.”



Steve Wilson, in the original offices of Lee Wilson & Company, is a descendant of Lee Wilson. Credit William Widmer for The New York Times

To lead the transformation, he hired John Faulkner, an academic with a background in architecture who had taught Mr. Lawrence's two children at a private school in Nashville. Mr. Faulkner is a de facto town manager, historian and cultural adviser. He works with the elected town government, which contracts with the company for most services.

"We're still learning where the lines are drawn," said Justin Cissell, 34, a member of the town council.

Mr. Faulkner, tapping into money provided by Mr. Lawrence's company, tackled the basics first. He persuaded the telephone companies to improve cellphone service. He painted the Tudor buildings on the square an appropriate British green. He cleaned up the town's hardwood groves — rarities in the flat Delta region that the Wilson family planted 100 years ago.

Then he talked the owner of the Elegant Farmer, a favorite restaurant in nearby Memphis, to send a young chef and his wife to Wilson to reopen the shuttered cafe, promising in return a farm to grow food for it.

"A good cafe is the cornerstone of a town," Mr. Faulkner said.

The food is a delicious anomaly in the region, but the prices have a few people grumbling. Who pays \$14 for a hamburger around here?

Still, it is popular. Eating there on a recent afternoon were the nine remaining members of a Presbyterian church in nearby Bassett. The youngest was 70.

“It’s not Arkansas plate lunch portions, but it was good,” said Harper Oakes, 73.

More sweeping changes are coming. Plans are underway to open a small private academy called the Delta School to educate promising children of farmers and the region’s professional class, and Mr. Lawrence said he wanted to find ways for the town’s poorest to get ahead, too.

With help from the state, a museum will open in 2016 near the town square to showcase rare pre-Columbian pottery, from a Native American group called the Nodenas, [that was recovered in the 1920s by James Hampson](#), whose nearby archaeological site bears his name. It will be the first new building on the town square in more than 50 years.



A chef from Memphis was brought in to open the Wilson Café. Credit William Widmer for The New York Times

There are plans for concerts and British car shows and an artists’ co-op. And Mr. Faulkner is working with the family of Johnny Cash, hoping it will allow the town to rename its little theater in honor of the musician, whose childhood home is 13 miles away in Dyess.

All of it will be set amid a handful of stately mansions and Tudor buildings, most of which were built after one of Mr. Wilson's sons came back from a honeymoon trip to England in the 1920s.

It all sounds a bit like something Walt Disney might have imagined. Not so, said Mr. Faulkner.

"This town has so much character we don't have to make it up," he said.

Still, the distance between a little Arkansas farm town and a regional beacon of renewal and culture seems vast. But Mr. Lawrence is a patient man, said his wife, Lisa.

"He doesn't take no for an answer," she said. "If this town is not re-created, he will die trying."