



W

ith the expertise of Signature Landscape Solutions, Inc., mere backyards can be carefully transformed into elegant and livable rooms and kitchens. Outdoor spaces can offer fun family afternoons, romantic alfresco dinners, evenings of relaxing entertainment and an improved quality of life. How would you like to spend your time? Let SLS, Inc. help you optimize the enjoyment of your space and get it ready for the warm days of Spring and Summer.



**770-982-0582**  
*signaturelandscapesolutions.com*



# Growth from the Inside Out

## OGLETHORPE *and* OCONEE



~ Profiles by Taylor Dahl

**O**NE IS ONE OF THE LARGEST COUNTIES IN LAND MASS IN Georgia. The other, one of the most economically thriving counties in the State. For Oglethorpe and Oconee counties, their economic and sustainable foundation is built ultimately by the residents who live there and work there. And it is their passion for their communities that these citizens continue pushing toward its prosperity.

### Oglethorpe

*Preserving the Past and Building a Future*

**O**glethorpe is the largest county in Northeast Georgia. This rural county is full of paved and dirt roads, small communities, forests and rolling terrain, much of which is agricultural and largely unspoiled.

The nostalgic community of Oglethorpe is looking towards the future, as Cary Fordyce, president and economic development director of the county’s chamber of commerce explains, “Oglethorpe county is embarking on a program to present ourselves to the world.

“The first step is to create a brand that will encompass all of the activities and business interests in the county. Two of the propositions that the county has identified are tourism and

**The University of Georgia College of Environment and Design students begin the charrette with a tour of Lexington via horse-drawn carriage.**

hospitality, which will get integrated into the branding effort that everyone in the county will have the opportunity to participate in.”

Nestled in the center of this growing county is Lexington, a small town that has remained true to its eighteenth and nineteenth century origins.. The residents of Lexington are a key part to its revitalization and have come together to rejuvenate the town by balancing its historic past with a very promising future.

Lexington will honor its past through a Living History weekend, October 26-27, hosted by the Goodness Grows Nursery. One of the main events of the weekend is a tour called “Legends of Oglethorpe.” Actors will be stationed around the nursery portraying nine of the county’s most historical figures. From an American explorer to a man who was expected to succeed George Washington as president, rich tales of how the county originated will inform and inspire visitors. Included in the ticket will be a brochure for an independent walking tour throughout the historic district, and the option for a horse and carriage ride, provided by the Lexington Historic Tours, and a boxed lunch provided by Sabine’s Coffee House. Additionally, a portion of the ticket sales will go towards the preservation of the structure of the Lexington Presbyterian Church, which was put on the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservations list of Places and Peril for 2013.

The Living History Tour is the perfect example of Lexington’s past meeting present as its host, Goodness Grows Nursery, has

## Oglethorpe Demographics

### OGLETHORPE COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Cary Fordyce, president  
Linda Parrish, tourism director  
1158 Athens Road  
Crawford, Ga. 30630  
706.743.3113  
[www.countycommerce.org](http://www.countycommerce.org)

### OGLETHORPE COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Ronnie Boggs, chairman  
City of Lexington  
223 West Main St.  
Lexington, Ga. 30648  
706.743.3322

### BY THE NUMBERS

Land Area (in square miles):  
439.01  
County Population: 14,618  
Median Household Income:  
\$40,906

### MUNICIPALITIES

Arnoldsville  
Crawford  
Lexington (county seat)  
Maxeys

### TOP EMPLOYERS

Oglethorpe County School System - 385  
Oglethorpe County - 162  
Quiet Oaks Nursing Home - 65  
Piedmont Landscape Management, Inc. - 50  
Big Services, Inc. - 43  
Centurian Poultry, Inc. - 36  
Oglethorpe Children's Academy, LLC - 35  
Bell's Food Store - 35  
Quarries, Inc. - 31  
The Commercial Bank - 28  
Greater Georgia Printers, Inc. - 21  
Smith Ford Sales, inc. - 14  
Goodness Grows - 13



Downtown Lexington

been providing a strong addition to the county since 1977.

According to its owner Rick Berry, “Our nursery is internationally known, people from all over the world to see the plant materials we grow and the nursery itself.”

Berry is passionate about his nursery, and the living history event provides proof. “The people of Oglethorpe have always been really receptive and supportive of everything we do. I really don’t think you could find a better community where everyone is friendly, pleasant and optimistic. And, at the moment, there are individuals in Lexington that are striving very hard to bring life back into the community to make more businesses and better the infrastructure of the county as a whole to make it more welcoming to other industries and people in general.”

Ronnie Boggs, chairman of the Downtown Development Authority, is one of those many Lexington natives who appreciates the city’s rich history and is excited for what is to come.

“Lexington was a sleepy town for a long time. There are many beautiful, old historic homes here, but about three years ago, the Downtown Development Authority formed in hopes of bringing the business back to town and restoring the downtown area.” This means bringing the focus of business to the central downtown areas, which will ultimately bring people back to the downtown areas.

The Downtown Development Authority worked with the University of Georgia College of Design in 2012 to perform a Charrette [intensive effort to finish a project] for the city of Lexington. The team made suggestions on how Lexington could market itself, putting an emphasis on old



Inside Oglethorpe Fresh

Photos by full circle photography



# Trust the Mouse to Protect Your House!

- Green Pest Control
- Termite Control
- Green Property Solutions
- Lawn Care
- Green Mosquito Reduction
- Wildlife Services
- Fire Ant Control
- Attic Insulation
- Commercial Services
- Complete Crawl Space

Call today to receive

**\$25 OFF**

**NorPest Green**

\*Expires 8/31/13. Not valid with other offers. For new service only. Call for details. Offer code: Mon25

## Northwest Exterminating

Creating Healthier Living and Working Environments for Homes and Businesses

770-266-6093 | callnorthwest.com



**MADISON**  
GEORGIA  
MORGAN COUNTY

*An  
Authentically  
Southern  
Experience*

*Visit And Enjoy Historic  
Attractions, Dining, Shopping,  
Lodging, and A Healthy Dose  
of Hospitality*

[www.madisonga.org](http://www.madisonga.org)  
Visitor Center Open Daily  
Call (800) 709-7406  
One Hour East of Atlanta on I-20, Exit 114



## Oconee Demographics

### OCONEE COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

55 Nancy Dr.  
Watkinsville, Ga. 30677  
706.769.7947  
[www.oconeechamber.org](http://www.oconeechamber.org)

### OCONEE COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Rusty Haygood, director  
23 N. Main St.  
Watkinsville, Ga. 30677  
706.769.5120  
[www.oconeecounty.com](http://www.oconeecounty.com)

### OCONEE COUNTY TOURISM

Peggy Holcomb, tourism director  
21 North Main Street  
Watkinsville, Ga. 30677  
706.769.5197  
[www.visitaconee.com](http://www.visitaconee.com)

### BY THE NUMBERS

Land Area (in square miles):  
184.29  
County Population: 33, 619  
Median Household Income:  
\$75,136 (US Census)

### MUNICIPALITIES

Bishop  
Bogart  
North High Shoals  
Watkinsville (county seat)

### LARGEST EMPLOYERS

Oconee County Board of Education - 975  
Wal Mart - 400  
Oconee County Government - 335  
St. Mary's Health Care System - 250  
Zaxby's (Corporate) - 200  
Information Technology Services - 180  
Benson's Bakery - 150  
Family Life Enrichment Center - 150  
Lowe's - 150  
Caterpillar - 140

structure and protecting the integrity of the historic community. A key player in the Charrette was Linda Helmly, coordinator of Oglethorpe Fresh and a founding board member of the Downtown Development Authority.

"Oglethorpe Fresh was the business model the Charrette suggested the town follow," states Helmly. "I grew up in Lexington, [and after living in Charleston for many years], came back home and was really concerned that Lexington wasn't moving. I was trained on how important it was to start with a grassroots initiative that brings in people from the community, sparking a common interest and common development. I wanted to help, so I started with a farmers market, which was the first pulse [of the revitalization]."

According to Helmly, the rebirth of Lexington is more than a group of individuals trying to launch something. It is a collaboration with the city and the businesses to grow and develop even more. She adds that the boom in Lexington is as simple as community-based projects. "With Oglethorpe Fresh, we decided to only showcase what is in town. We got the pulse going with



the farmer's market or a weekly event where we worked within the community on cleanup projects. Small things, like putting plants in the planters, made all the difference in our community."

And while the town still has more steps to take, the Charrette gave them some renderings that will help Lexington move and continue to grow. "The way I was trained in Charleston was to start with the infrastructure," says Helmly, "Start with the Downtown Development Authority, build the community and keep the heritage in track."

More people are moving into the Lexington community. In fact, Helmly says that many young University of Georgia alumni have moved to the area after visiting during their college years. People who move to Lexington are looking for a specific way of life – they value the history of the town, the structure of the old buildings and are willing to shop local.

## Oconee Small Business Booms

"The backbone of America really is small business," says Tom Odom, Oconee Chamber interim president. "Just recently, the Oconee Chamber reinstated small business seminars that teach a variety of topics for small business owners. We believe it is important to network with others in like situations because a majority of our chamber is small business, and as a chamber it's important to support the health of small business." *Georgia Connector* reached out to several small businesses in Oconee to talk about how they've survived – and thrived – during these economic times.

### Branch Contractors

According to David Branch, owner of Branch Contractors Inc./Branch Environmental Inc., owning a small business during these times really shouldn't be any different thriving times. The Branch team offers "general contracting



expertise and specializes in insurance claim restoration and emergency renovation."

"While it may seem different, it shouldn't be. During easy times, companies may not work as hard to get customers because business is plentiful. During easier times, people turn cash fast and borrow and spend money because everything in their business is good. Branch Contractors/Branch Environmental has maintained our strength during the bad times because, when things were good, we were practicing the same principals we practice now: We don't borrow money, we work debt free and we grow at the speed of cash, meaning as we earn, we spend, invest and grow. If we cannot make money without borrowing money, we aren't going to be able to make it."

While that may seem easier said than done, Branch's business is reaping the rewards.

His advice to a small business is simple. "Practice slow, steady growth that you can

This is a good time of year  
to be reminded that there  
*is* a bank that goes  
to bat for your  
financial future.



1901 W. Spring St. • Monroe • GA • 770.207.3000  
[www.libertyfirst.us](http://www.libertyfirst.us)



  
LIBERTY  
FIRSTBANK™  
*Your kind of bank!*



sustain or maintain on a cash basis, don't borrow money to grow where you may end up doing things or making promises that aren't great ideas."

How he maintains a high standard for his work is not a secret. Branch Contractors implemented several book studies such as *Good to Great* by James Collins and *Flawless Execution* by James Murphy. These book studies inspired Branch Contractors to make a great name, take care of their employees and also serve and give back to Oconee County.

"*Good to Great* states that the one thing keeping a company from being great is being really good. When companies feel comfortable, it keeps them from feeling great. When the economy tanked, companies had a choice to make: Either to be good or great." While this provoked many hard decisions for Branch Contractors such as budget cuts, it was a necessary adjustment to take the company from good to great.

*Flawless Execution* helped them succeed by using the same techniques and systems that the military uses to teach America's fighter pilots in the business world. This book made Branch ask himself, "Why can't we train our employees to have the same skill level or trust or accountability level as an Air Force pilot who flies a \$30 million plane across the sky?" It taught to thoroughly plan everything, debrief after each project, discuss all mistakes, all the good things they did, as well as the lessons learned from the project. Branch adds, "In small business, errors can turn you upside down. The key is to only make new mistakes, never repeat the same mistakes."

Like any business, location matters. Branch says it's a place [Oconee County] where the quality of work you produce means everything if you want to succeed.

"My family has been here since the Revolutionary War. I'm the eighth generation Branch. This is a tight-knit community that is very loyal to our hometown brand, but Oconee is also open to new business. Just because I'm local doesn't mean I have a locked down advantage. This is a good thing because when you get comfortable you lose your sight and vision and could eventually fail. Oconee is definitely a county built for success."

## Tribe Fitness

**T**ribe Fitness has thrived during these trying times by focusing on quality rather than quantity. Stating that it is not a typical gym, Tribe offers an approach "to functional fitness that keeps you on top of your game with a powerful support system," with trainers focusing "on exercise that transcends traditional workouts."

"I think for us, we've had to put more of a focus on the quality of service that we offer," states Clint Watson, CEO of Tribe Fitness. "Many times, businesses can get caught up on the quantity of sales numbers, how much volume they're doing, and I feel like in a down economy, you have to work even harder to increase your value proposition. For us, our value proposition is the level of service we offer, compared to the level of service that competitors may offer, which is why we're focusing on quality, not quantity." That quality includes making an effort to ensure

that Tribe clientele know what they should be doing outside of their personal training sessions with regards to workouts and nutrition habits.

"When you think of a personal trainer, you think of someone who will push and motivate you," he says. "And we do that, but we also make more of an effort to ensure our clients know how to take care of themselves outside of our personal training sessions."

Tribe has also been as smart as possible when it comes to marketing dollars. Watson believes that "when there is a boom in the economy, businesses throw money into the marketing budget. In a down economy, businesses need to be more prudent as far as tracking what marketing is working for them and what isn't, and pushing aside the marketing that isn't giving any return."



Watson agrees that Oconee is a great location for Tribe and he is in the company of many successful small business owners who have chosen this location.

"There are a lot of great people in Oconee who have really excellent reputations, and getting to meet other business owners going through the same

experiences as I am is a great benefit of being a small business owner in Oconee."

In business since 2009, Watson is enjoying ownership. "Owning a small business is fun. No two days are exactly alike, which keeps things interesting. The prospect of the future is fun to think about because you create your own future. When you own a business, the sky is the limit."

## LAD Trucking

**M**ack Guest of LAD Truck Lines, Inc., agrees that Oconee is a great place to do small business. "My brother and I have enjoyed owning a small business in Oconee and look forward to many more years here."

Founded in 1997, Mack Guest, a former offensive lineman at UGA, transferred the principles from the field to his trucking company: intelligence, agility and strength in different combinations move heavy bodies from place to place. Guest, along with his brother Judson, have directed growth into four different entities: LAD Truck Lines, LAD Logistics, LAD Warehousing and Distribution and LAD Records Management.

The community is also a big part of why LAD Truck Lines has thrived.

"We've survived because of hard work and a little bit of luck. We have great people who work with us and we serve great customers every day," says Guest.

Oconee is approximately an hour to the airport, and just hours away from the mountains and the beach. LAD Truck Lines has two locations – one in Watkinsville and the other in Athens. 📍