

Reclaiming the Heart of Carolina

RELICS OF SEISMIC ECONOMIC SHIFTS DOT THE RURAL LANDSCAPE OF EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA—AND THEN TURN UP IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED PLACES. HERE, ONE ALUMNUS IS REPURPOSING ABANDONED BARNs, WAREHOUSES AND MILLS INTO A PRIZED COMMODITY. BY MARCIA C. LANDSKROENER M'02, PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE LITWIN

THE SOUTHEAST'S VAST FORESTS of Long-leaf heart pine are long gone, harvested into extinction more than 100 years ago. The textile mills and warehouses built of that heart pine are now shuttered, the jobs lost to cheap labor abroad. With the demise of the American tobacco industry, old barns stand empty and in disrepair. For some, it's a sad state of affairs. For Jim Blount '92, it's an opportunity too good to pass up.

This young entrepreneur is determined that the virgin wood used to build the nation's industrial infrastructure be preserved, enjoyed and treasured for generations to come. Under his leadership during the past four years, his custom millwork company has become a leader in the industry of reclaiming, engineering and marketing antique heart pine and other vintage woods—hickory, chestnut, yellow pine, cypress, oak.

Blount is the principal in charge of operations for Heritage Wide Plank Floors, a company operating from the sleepy town of Maury, just a few miles from Greenville, North Carolina. It's a new name for a family-owned business that sparked his imagination eight years



THIS PAGE: Jim Blount '92 has returned to his native North Carolina, where he operates Heritage Wide Plank Floors. **OPPOSITE:** Reclaimed heart pine flooring has huge appeal to homeowners interested in a durable, eco-friendly product with a history.



ago, when he was raising investment capital for small companies in the Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill area.

With literally thousands of tobacco barns left standing after farmers could no longer compete on the world market with cheaper overseas suppliers, tobacco farmers were jumping at the chance to have a deconstruction crew come in and haul away the weathered boards—at no cost to them. Wayne Noble, the company's patriarch and now shop foreman at Heritage, recognized that the barns' only value now was as reclaimed lumber. His little sawmill in Maury was in the middle of farmland that in its heyday produced more tobacco than any other region in the world. Blount could see the potential, and he had the contacts to make it fly.

Prior to returning to his native state in 1998, the former history major had spent several years in Washington, working as an assistant to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget during the Clinton Administration. He also spent two years as business liaison to Secretary Robert E. Rubin at the U.S. Department of the Treasury where he advised the Washington, DC, offices of Fortune 500 companies on tax and legislative issues before Congress.

"I knew this business had some traction," Blount recalls. "When I first encountered the company [Our Heritage Preserved] in 2001, the Noble family was taking down raw boards from standing structures in the area and then selling the planks wholesale as raw material. The

mission behind the company—saving part of North Carolina's heritage—appealed to me. But I thought that we could be more aggressive in manufacturing and marketing wood products directly to builders, architects and specialty flooring companies. I had good connections with people in the banking and

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construction industries, so I had a built-in sales force."

Blount closed the deal that gave him a large stake in the company in 2005 and brought in as his partner and chief financial officer Drock Vincent, a banker he had grown up with in Greenville. With eight employees and the addition in 2006 of new precision equipment that can run tongue-and-groove for flooring as well as shoe molding, beaded board, baseboard and other wood molding, the custom millwork company began to prosper. In the first four years, sales grew by 35%. He attributes much of that growth to consumer demand for an authentic American product with a storied past. Customers paying for premium flooring, hand-hewn beams, stair parts and other custom millwork want to know the wood's pedigree. Blount's products come with a certificate

of authenticity that details the origins of the wood, including the lumber's original purpose (tobacco barn, warehouse or mill) and the county in which it was reclaimed.

Heritage's reclaimed wood flooring products are salvaged from unused tobacco barns, tobacco warehouses, smoke-

heart pine wood whose beauty and color have been enhanced by years of aging. The heart wood is claret-colored, bug-proof, rot-resistant and incredibly hard.

It's worth noting that Heritage's salvaging efforts are not indiscriminate. When Blount comes across a historically significant structure, he alerts the North Carolina Preservation Society in the state capitol. He offers the structure to the organization, and they endeavor to raise private funds to restore it. "This is very costly, and there have been only a few structures that have actually been fully renovated," says Blount.

The most popular flooring is milled from the huge beams that supported the textile mills of Guilford County. Some of Blount's customers prefer the rustic look of heart pine flooring taken from tobacco barns; others like an "oily pine," old



THIS PAGE: With antique lumber salvaged from tobacco barns, Heritage uses a hand-distressed milling technique to retain the wood's natural surface texture. **OPPOSITE:** This tobacco barn in Pictolus, NC, was dismantled for the Huntley family; the wood will be remilled and installed in their home in Raleigh.

flooring richly colored with a patina of cotton seed oil found in warehouses out of the Port of Norfolk.

Regardless of their aesthetics, all Heritage customers appreciate the idea of using locally reclaimed heart pine lumber superior in quality to commercially manufactured hardwood flooring imported from South America or Asia. "When I got into the business, I didn't know what 'green flooring' was," admits Blount. "Once the green movement took hold, our product had a certain cachet."

Blount's emerging company first made a splash with a story in *Coastal Living* magazine. The builder developing the River Dunes community on the Intercoastal Highway was using Heritage's reclaimed flooring in its luxury homes. One River Dunes house with Heritage flooring was featured in 2007 as the magazine's 10th Anniversary Idea House. Heritage flooring was also installed in the Medical School Library at East Carolina University in Greenville, and in several fine homes in Pinehurst and the Outer Banks.

With a firm foothold in North Carolina, the company began expanding its market northward into the Baltimore/Washington area, even as it was introducing new growth wide planks of hickory and cherry. Heritage's new growth products carry Forestry Stewardship Council certification. For every tree harvested, another is planted.

Today, EcoFinishes in Alexandria, VA, is one of Blount's best customers, and he is making inroads into the nation's capital. In partnership with Design DC, Blount recently completed two big jobs there that have catapulted him into the green building commercial market. Blount worked with the custom flooring design firm



to install his product in two public spaces—an upscale farm-to-table restaurant, Agraria,

dynamic neighborhood in DC, which opened with great fanfare in early February. Agraria,

new restaurants in DC. From the floor up, it is the very model of sustainable dining.

"LEED is an environmentally friendly building program established by the U.S. Green Building Council," explains Blount. "It's a big deal in our business."

Even with the downturn in the economy, Blount says the green building industry is growing by 25% nationwide. While new housing starts have stalled, residential renovation projects and commercial ventures have kept his saws humming.

On a given day last November, Heritage had fifteen jobs

THE MOST POPULAR FLOORING IS MILLED FROM THE HUGE BEAMS THAT SUPPORTED THE TEXTILE MILLS OF GUILFORD COUNTY.

just blocks from the White House and the Spanish Education (SED) Multicultural Center in Adams Morgan, arguably the most culturally diverse and

with its emphasis on seasonal, farmer-sourced food, was the first LEED-certified restaurant in Washington, and was noted in 2008 among the top three



in various stages of production: eleven using reclaimed wood and four calling for new growth lumber. A three-man crew was off-site, disassembling an old barn. His sales manager was on her way to Baltimore. In the yard beyond the shop stood stacks of salvaged lumber ready to be denailed and remilled. Blount pointed out a stack of loblolly pine logs destined for a visitors' center in Wilmington, and a pile of hand-hewn beams he found in a warehouse in Hillsborough.

"These beams are over 200 years old," Blount exclaims. "They are some of the oldest

beams I've ever seen. With the original saw marks still visible, these will be an extraordinary feature in someone's home."

Blount wants to be sure his company is poised to take advantage of new business opportunities so he will be better positioned to weather the economic recession. The move into old growth lumber allows the company to offer long lengths of flooring, which make a more beautiful room than short boards. Heritage recently expanded its line to include other popular reclaimed species, such as oak and chestnut, and has begun to salvage and

resell architectural elements from condemned structures. Blount and his partner have also launched a sideline business, Heritage Hardwood Finishing, which handles floor installation. On the job board was a project to engineer parquet flooring in reclaimed oak.

"So many subcontractors were mishandling the installation," says Blount. "When the customer is paying \$7 to \$10 a square foot, they want it done right."

To his delight, Blount just landed a residential job near St. Michaels on Maryland's Eastern Shore. "This is awesome," he

The Staughton home features heart pine wood from the wife's family farm in Tarboro, NC. The wood, reclaimed from tobacco barns on the Edgecomb County property, is a select grade plain-sawn heart pine.

says. "I'll be able to swing by Chestertown and see Washington College," he says. "I'd love to have a second look at the floors in Hynson-Ringgold House."

Marcia Landskroener, editor of the Washington College Magazine and DIY enthusiast, knows the difference between quarter-sawn and plain-sawn flooring.