

**Interviewee:** Tarmey, Mark  
**Interviewer:** Tara Benton  
**Date:** March 13, 2008  
**Category:** Tallahassee; Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board  
**Status:** Open  
**Tape location:** Box #57

**Benton:** This is Tara Benton, interviewing Mark Tarmey in Tallahassee, and today is March 13, 2008. Mark, why don't you state your name and where we are.

**Tarmey:** This is Mark Tarmey, from 4M Design Group.

**Benton:** Alright, let's talk a little bit about your background. Had you been involved with any historic preservation work prior to your involvement with the Trust?

**Tarmey:** Yes, I was with the Orlando Landmarks Commission and I actually have a degree in historic preservation from the University of Florida. I also studied at the Preservation Institute at Nantucket where I was a summer intern for one summer and then a teacher for the following summer from 1980- 1981.

**Benton:** Ok, and did you become involved with the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board when it was in existence?

**Tarmey:** I did not live here in Tallahassee at the time.

**Benton:** Ok, so when did you become a member of the Trust?

**Tarmey:** I joined the Trust when I moved back to Tallahassee in 1998.

**Benton:** And how long did you serve as president?

**Tarmey:** I was a board member for a year before I was nominated to be president by then and current treasurer Ben Phipps.

**Benton:** And you served as president for the remainder of your term?

**Tarmey:** I served as President for two consecutive terms. I believe they were 2000-2001 and 2001-2002.

**Benton:** Ok, and when you began serving on the board, what was the primary mission of the Tallahassee Trust?

**Tarmey:** I'm not sure we had a well defined mission at that point. We had been sort of spun

off from the Tallahassee Preservation Board, which was then a part of the State of Florida, Secretary of State's office, Division of Historic Resources, you're aware of all this?

**Benton:** Yes.

**Tarmey:** Ok. And essentially all of the Historic Preservation Boards with the exception of, I believe, historic Pensacola, St. Augustine and Key West were spun off. Since then, those have also been spun OK So each preservation board in essence became an independent non-profit organization, tasked with doing many of the same mission statements, but without a client, without a state sponsorship.

**Benton:** And the funding?

**Tarmey:** And the funding was, like most nonprofits, were through membership organizations.

**Benton:** Ok, You mentioned on the phone your efforts to refine the mission of the Trust when you became a member of the board, so-

**Tarmey:** Let me expand upon that a bit, the purpose of this is for your thesis, is that correct?

**Benton:** I'm doing a small project on the history of the Trust's involvement with the Perkins House.

**Tarmey:** Ok, so a school project?

**Benton:** Yes.

**Tarmey:** Ok. When I became involved with the Trust we were in an affordable but fairly inadequate space in Railroad Square and one of our core missions was retention and maintenance of the Leon County and City of Tallahassee historic archives. And at that point we realized that we really did not have a contract with the city we were just sort of providing that service because that's what the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board had done. So when most of the state boards were relegated to a nonprofit organization they retained ownership of their piece of those archives and were essentially fulfilling that mission. And what we did was we sat down and we identified what the real purpose of the Trust was.

**Benton:** So what did you envision that to be?

**Tarmey:** Well what I envisioned was exactly what we were doing but how do we -you know a nonprofit doesn't mean you don't make money. And we were not being successful, I think, at the level of expectation for the maintenance and preservation of the city archives and the county archives. So we thought that we were providing a valuable service so the very first

thing we did was for about a year we carefully documented what it took to do that in terms of man hours and staff. And of course the numbers were staggering. When you realize what you spend to do that, we were spending in excess of \$30-40,000 for both the city and county. So we thought it was appropriate to then go ask the city and the county for a raise. Each one of them I think was donating at that point \$25,000 just to our existence. And I believe what we did was we incrementally, each year we went back and asked for a budget appropriation until we were satisfied that we were being paid an adequate amount for the preservation and maintenance of those archives.

**Benton:** Ok, and at that point you were in Railroad Square?

**Tarmey:** At that point we were still in Railroad Square and we became aware of the availability potentially of the Perkins House and my vision for that was that perhaps we could have a sort of a statewide preservation resource center. And at that time I actually also approached the Florida Trust about moving their executive offices into the Perkins House along with us so that we could have sort of a cost sharing thing. And, incidentally at that time the answer was no. [Laughter]  
So, the Perkins House turned out to be financially affordable for the Trust and a much more adequate space for the maintenance and preservation of the city and county archives.

**Benton:** Ok, had you been actively looking for a space?

**Tarmey:** We had -

**Benton:** I spoke with Beth LaCivita this morning and she said finding a space was sort of on the middle burner.

**Tarmey:** It was, it was on the middle burner. It wasn't a front burner thing, and as you may or may not know a lot of historic properties really never change hands through traditional manners. They don't go on the open real estate market very often at all. Typically there are a core constituency of people who are interested in historic properties and very, very often, historic properties trade hands by word of mouth. Everybody knows who wants what, but because they're difficult to evaluate and difficult to appraise, unless they're in spectacular condition, it's hard to find one that's been sold recently of sort of the same place, I mean they're all in some level of disrepair, because of the historic nature of the house.

**Benton:** Right.

**Tarmey:** The Perkins House had been, I'll say softly renovated. It had had a nice renovation done to it but not an extraordinary renovation to it, so it met our criteria, one from a financial standpoint and two from the fact that it wasn't extraordinarily renovated and if it had been we probably couldn't have afforded it. But it was structurally sound, it had a good roof on it, there was no perceivable problems like failing siding or plumbing problems. It had relatively recently

new air conditioning that was put in with the city grant program. So there starts to be a series of, I don't now how to say this.. . You start connecting the dots. We're a subordinate of the city, it had a city utility. One of the things that we help do to historic buildings -"hey we recommend you use the city utility to come in and cool your historic building."

**Benton:** So had you worked with the owner before?

**Tarmey:** We had not, but the owner was a member of the Trust and the owner had conveyed to our executive director that he was considering selling the property. And it being one of the smaller properties -and it's 1,700 square feet. It's not -most of the properties are in excess of 24-3,000 square feet. We certainly didn't need 3,000 square feet; we were in 600 square feet we would have been happy to have 1,000. Getting 14 or 1,500 was like a bonus and we actually had room left over and we thought, well, we can offer that office or that office suite to a sub-tenant to help us pay the rent. To help us pay the mortgage as the case may be.

**Benton:** So before you heard about this house being available, were you actively looking?

**Tarmey:** Yeah.

**Benton:** What did you have in mind, were you specifically looking for a historic building?

**Tarmey:** Well, we were specifically looking for a building in, we now have four, but at the time we had two designated historic districts. So, in order to sort of be true to our mission it would have made sense for us to have a building that was either historic anywhere in Tallahassee, one, or two, in one of our designated special character districts.

**Benton:** The districts at the time were Calhoun.. .

**Tarmey:** Well Calhoun is called the Gold Dust District and the Park Avenue special character district was the other one. So we had two, at the time we had two. We also now have Myers Park now and I think we are very close to having Magnolia Heights designated as a special character district.

**Benton:** Ok. So when you found out this house was available, let's talk about the funding and how you structured that.

**Tarmey:** Well, there's two things you do. First you go and you ask your constituency. You sort of fund-raise. And we knew, we thought we would probably be able to bring in about \$50,000 which I believe we -

**Benton:** As a grant situation?

**Tarmey:** No, no as a -if you're going to go for a cost share -if you're going to ask for a

grant, there's normally a dependence on the nonprofit to come to the table with something. You just can't come with nothing. And they would really like that to be a half or a quarter. Some measurable, how am I going to say this? They want you to come with some measurable good faith effort to be a partner. They don't want you to depend on the grant for finding. So we were able to say, ok look, we've got now two \$40,000 a year, now I think we were in the high 40's or low \$50,000 because we've added staff and we do more things better and we have more professional staff than we had before. Before we had one professional staff and volunteers. So, the numbers were lower from an operating expense. But as you put on more staff and do more things in a more professional manner for the city, you have to pay that freight so to speak, the demand load for what it costs to do the work of the Trust. So I digress but let me go back. think we fund-raised about \$40,000 and I think most of that came from the board or friends of the board or typically the preservation community usually is people who already have an interest, are members, are members of the Florida Trust, or had other historic properties who are able to give us \$200, \$500, or \$1,000.

So what you do is you go to a local bank, and there are several local banks, and now Bank of America is one of those national players who are preservation friendly, who find value in restoration/historic preservation. For us, it ended up being Capital City Bank and we knew that they knew that this house was probably available, that it was, if it had gone on the market, it was probably undervalued, and so it would be easy to generate an appraisal for a higher value. Obviously what you want to do is tell them you want to borrow \$150,000 to buy something that is worth \$200,000 so you have a built in cushion. You know, anybody can get a loan for anything, it's just a matter of collateral, you can ask any bank.

So the collateral would have been some funds that we raised, plus the fact that we had a local bank that was, I think, not only preservation savvy but also politically connected enough to the sensibilities of the city, that saw that particular non-profit you know, banks do great services for non-profit organizations, but they can sort of target or cherry-pick those nonprofits that are close to the hearts of those who are running the bank. Mr. Smith owns a historic property on Park Avenue. That was a very good fit.

**Benton:** Is that who you worked with?

**Tarmey:** Well, we talked to Bill Colledge, who was the loan officer, but ultimately it's the president of the bank who says, you know. And for us, you know, Farmers and Merchants Bank is very close to the city of Thomasville and does a lot of work in Thomasville. Capital City does it here. Typically local banks do that for you. I had not had very much experience except now at the Florida Trust we've used Sun Bank or SunTrust and they are very preservation friendly where we own a property down in Ft. Lauderdale.

**Benton:** With the, I spoke with Mr. Phipps, briefly, on the phone, and he said there was a first and a second mortgage?

**Tarmey:** There was.

**Benton:** Both with Capital City?

**Tarmey:** [nods]

**Benton:** And, as far as the tenants in the house, did you envision that from the beginning?

**Tarmey:** Yes. We recognized that there was more space than we would need and two, that we would probably need the help financially to make the numbers work.

**Benton:** So you counted on that?

**Tarmey:** We counted on that, and we tried very hard to elicit and sign a tenant before we closed but that didn't happen. We were very fortunate that the little group that's in there now that's an architectural CEU group -it's a good fit, like-minded, very careful. You know they treat the house well. There's a stewardship sort of principle there. And you have to think about those things. That's all, they had certain requirements for a few parking spaces and only one office and a little bit of autonomy where they could come and go as they wanted to and I think they turned out to be a very good client. Again, remember, I haven't been involved in a couple years. I kind of de-boarded myself from a lot of things to become president of the Florida Trust because it's an enormously time consuming job.

**Benton:** Do you remember, speaking of parking, did the previous owner get a special variance from the city for parking?

**Tarmey:** Yeah, two designated spaces.

**Benton:** Did you have anything to do with that?

**Tarmey:** We did not but I know that we piggy-backed on that and because it is a non-profit and public use that we were able to get designated parking spaces because obviously, it's right across the street from Leon High School and for about the first three or four months, we were always running two or three kids off because they get there early; they get there before Beth and the staff and there would be no parking spaces. It had become a sort of, people knew there were two parking spaces there. So it was the only city parking space that was available, and it was non-metered.

**Benton:** Ok, and as far as the purchase of that house, and a house in general, was the rest of the board OK with that?

**Tarmey:** Well, it's nothing that -you know, an executive committee comes up with a vision, and the vision cannot be enacted without the support of the board and normally that goes through a series of committees and then it comes up as a discussion item and then it is talked about ad infinitum until somebody makes a motion that we should really do this. We knew that that was

something the board was inclined to do and all I did was feed off of that idea to sort of make it concrete, to actually find a place, and have board members go on their own and walk around the property and actually get next to it and kind of feel like that's what they wanted to do you know, and the women's club came over and planted a garden, we added a fence and there were some other things that were done to sort of personalize it and give it -so the Trust sort of took ownership of it, not in a legal sense but sort of in a spiritual and more familiar sense. And then I think when we closed, we had a big ceremony where we hung the sign, and when you kind of hang your sign it's like planting a flag on the moon, you live there now, you know?

**Benton:** What, besides the price and availability, what did you like about the Perkins House?

**Tarmey:** Well, there -

**Benton:** Had you looked at any other properties?

**Tarmey:** We had, but everything that comes available just kind of comes available when it comes available. We had actually looked at the house across the street which was huge and it would have been probably more maintenance than we could have managed and it was a much bigger property than was necessary and we probably would have needed multiple tenants because back then the numbers were in probably the 350 [thousand dollar] range, which seemed insurmountable to us. But we had some core criteria, and that's really always the case. The core criteria for me would have been, one, there was a very strong attachment to one of the two historic special character districts. I think that would have been the overarching criteria. We could have been in All Saints, we could have been on Thomasville Road, but you know, if you are doing business with the city and the county, to plant your flag in the special character district would have been sort of number A on the highest priority criteria list. B would have been availability to where we were able to do the transaction, if possible, without a realtor being involved because there would have been this 7% sort of savings idea, 6, 7% which could have gone, you know when you're raising \$40,000 to have to give 6 or 7% away, is a big chunk of money.

And I normally work with the treasurer, in fact when I was coming to the Florida Trust, I became the treasurer for 3 years because I feel like a good way to understand an organization is to understand the finances. And much more so than I expected, because of his good stewardship, Ben Phipps has really kept a really strong hand on managing the money of the Trust so we were financially very fit. For a place that didn't have much money, it was all well taken care of. Which is huge because it makes you credit worthy when you go start asking a bank for loans. If you have a lot of credit unworthiness or a track record of not being very financially sound, it's tough. Doesn't matter what a good mission you have if the bank says you don't have a very smart business sensibility. And we didn't have that at all. And I attribute a lot of that to Ben.

**Benton:** Ok, and I think you said earlier, that house was already zoned for -

**Tarmey:** It was zoned for mixed-use, or commercial, and that way we didn't have to make the designation of taking it from a residence to a commercial because the buildings on both sides and across the street. And there's one other, sort of, I think it was important to the executive committee, I know it was important to me and I know at the time it was very important to Beth. The old Tallahassee Preservation Board was based in the Brokaw-McDougall House. So there was a very strong identity to the fact that the Tallahassee Trust, one of their main missions, and we didn't talk about this earlier, is they run the Tallahassee ARB, the Architectural Review Board, which is the board that oversees any modifications or changes to historic properties. That used to be done out of the Brokaw-McDougall House, and we were still sponsoring and running it out of the Brokaw-McDougall House. So it made very good sense for us to have some proximity to the Brokaw-McDougall House because as it was we were having to pack up files and take everything to the Brokaw-McDougall House once a month for the board meeting. Now we can walk across the street. Now in fact they can have the board meeting in their own space, unless it's a very big deal then they can still have it at the Brokaw-McDougall House. But the idea was we stayed -you know if you're trying to sell the city on the fact that you're a sub-consultant and a service provider, you have to do a lot of things to show them, in Spanish it's *simpatico*, ok, a sympathy and a consistency with their mission statement. So a lot of that was that we wanted to be *simpatico* with carrying on the mission of the former board as an independent organization. We were providing that service for Leon County and Tallahassee.

**Benton:** So you would say while you were there, the main function of the Trust was the ARB and the records maintenance?

**Tarmey:** ARB and the records maintenance, that's really what they do. Those are the two critical core components and by the way that's very important because when you go and you have to put yourself in a position where you're sitting in front of the city or county commission and say, I want some money. What are you doing for us? What services do you provide? We're able to say, we're running your Architectural Review Board. And by the way we're providing it at this cost, and if you had to provide that you'd have to provide two people, and a secretary and your cost would be, it actually would be three times what we charge for it, so it makes it, I won't say it makes it an easy sell, but it makes it an easier sell for the commission to say hey, we're achieving something that we need to do as part of our Comp Plan. And you talk about an overarching principle, that's the big overarching principle. In every county's Comp Plan and in every city's piece of the Comp Plan is their zoning and maintenance of the historic districts and so that's in the Comp Plan, and we now have a nonprofit that's providing that service for us at a lower cost than we could provide it ourselves.

**Benton:** Ok, alright, and when you moved into the Perkins House did you envision that as a permanent home?

**Tarmey:** I did, in fact I really envisioned that as a permanent home for the Florida Trust and the Tallahassee Trust. It just sort of didn't work out that way, and now as president of Florida

Trust we've bought another property on Park Avenue, the historic Hays-Hood House, and that's our permanent headquarter building. And that was about a year and half ago. We just renovated it through the Secretary of Interior.

**Benton:** So you're getting good at this?

**Tarmey:** Well, I got a little practice on the Perkins House, and the Hays-Hood House was in much, much worse condition. We got two state grants for \$350,000 a piece, plus we bought that property for \$400,000. And we raised over \$150,000 ourselves. So we had a total investment of about \$1.3 million in that property, of which \$700,000 came from the state as a grant.

**Benton:** That's a lot of money. That's a lot of doing.

**Tarmey:** It is, and I'll tell you that when you do that, people, especially your constituency, sees you as having, you know to me there's a -I'm not that big a person about image, but if your image is, you're two or three people with a whole lot of files in a store front somewhere, that's a whole different thing from an organization where you have your sign hung out on one of the principal streets in the historic district. The ante's bigger, right? The stakes are bigger and you have better standing. So your constituency can say, they've got their act together. And from your banker's perspective, you're financially capable of securing a loan, and you now have a hard asset, and that asset continues to grow and gain value. That house that we probably bought for the Perkins House, and I don't remember, I think it was like \$189,000

**Benton:** Was it 189?

**Tarmey:** I don't -it wasn't a lot, 149, 189-

**Benton:** Was it \$159,000?

**Tarmey:** That's about right, somewhere in there. Coming out of a storage space in Railroad Square going to a \$159,000 house at the time seemed like a huge jump. That thing is probably worth \$300 or \$350,000 now.

**Benton:** Sorry to interrupt but when you moved in there, it was move-in ready, correct?

**Tarmey:** No problem, it's your interview. It was move-in ready, and that's that is a splendid thing. Because the Hays-Hood House, when we bought it, it was not move-in ready, it was renovation ready, like I said to the tune of \$850,000, and 20 months later. So you're making the transition, I think we purchased that in -it wasn't quite that long. We bought it in June of the previous year and we moved in in September of last year. So 18 months.

**Benton:** That's a long time.

**Tarmey:** But it was, part of it, 12 months of it was doing the actual renovation work.

**Benton:** But the Perkins House, there was no gap in moving in?

**Tarmey:** No, right after. I think we bought it in June and moved in in August. I was talking about the Hays-Hood House.

**Benton:** Right.

**Tarmey:** With Hays-Hood House there was a big gap.

**Benton:** But not with the Perkins House.

**Tarmey:** No, we moved from Railroad Square right in.

**Benton:** And lastly, the, what's the name of the company, do you know, that rents the space in the Perkins House?

**Tarmey:** You know I do, and I can't say it right now.

**Benton:** Did you envision having the tenants there forever as an income stream, or until the mortgage was paid off?

**Tarmey:** You know, I'm not sure I thought that far ahead. I probably thought that as long as we had a tenant it would make it easier on us. That at some point we would grow to the point where we would be able to manage it ourselves, or because of the value of the house and the fact that we got it very cheap, we would be able to do a buyout or a buy-down where we refinanced it and were able to have a big donor come in and give us \$50,000 and we would surrender a big portion of the mortgage, and we would do that over the course of 20 years, which is a typical mortgage, and now 25-30 years, things cost so much. You try to do incremental fund-raising and each time you set a goal, and we're doing this with the Florida Trust right now. You know, you go out and you say my goal is to raise a half million dollars and if you raise a quarter you're happy.

We're trying to raise a million, and if we get \$750, or \$500 [thousand], we'd be happy. The Florida Trust is a much bigger statewide organization. The Tallahassee Trust, if they tried to raise 250 or 100, they'd get 50 [thousand dollars] and what you'd do is dedicate some portion of that towards surrendering the mortgage. Just think about it, if they were able to do a \$100,000 fund-raiser and raise 25 [thousand] and did that four times, they would essentially kill what was left of the mortgage and have it paid off.

**Benton:** When you did the fund-raising for the Perkins House, was it board members going out, or staff?

**Tarmey:** It was board members, and it was staff. We did a very large mail request, plea, what would you call it? A campaign. Campaign is the appropriate word. A mail-in campaign. But most successful fund-raising is done face to face, and it's done in the network of people who are involved in the Trust. And the Trust, you know, it's weird. Historic preservation started as sort of a grass roots movement, and it really began in Florida to save the old Capitol. And the Florida Trust was born and so all the rest of the trusts were born out of that idea, and that was in the mid-'70s, and I could tell you that it has always had a constituency of people who are really sort of craft-oriented. They still love history, they love things that are made by hand. If you watch historic preservationists when they walk through a building, they're always putting their hands on the walls [gesturing] touching the hardware, because they're experiencing those things tactilely, that are historic, and I love watching it.

What I'm interested in is watching the people who are your age that have that in them. I don't know where it comes from, don't know if it's bad DNA or a good gene or whatever it is, those people who have that interest and are keen about that. I'm interested because you guys are the next board members of the Florida Trust, but you should first be a board member of your local trust. It should be here in Tallahassee while you're in school, or wherever it is you're from, you should be connected to that community because ultimately we're all sort of stitched together by that love of history and heritage. Do I sound like I'm on my soap box?

**Benton:** It sounds wonderful.

**Tarmey:** This is my best stump [laughter]

**Benton:** I wish there was a bigger audience here.

**Tarmey:** I know, this is my best stump. So, so, you know, you would write us a check for \$25 because, you wouldn't write us a check for \$100,000, yet. Because I believe that if you're inclined to write us a check for \$25 when you're a graduate student, that 50 years from now, you might be the person who writes a check for \$25,000. So, you're one of the gang, you're one of those preservation people, you're a preservation chick, you know? You're one of those preservation people. My kids are going to be that. They don't know it yet, but we go, where I go to lecture and talk and work. And so, my kids go to Williamsburg, Charleston, and Savannah and St. Augustine, and they think they're on vacation, they don't know I'm working.

**Benton:** Right, nice for them. And it fosters the -

**Tarmey:** Yeah, it does, and it fosters that love of -my parents, my dad was a guy that loved the National Parks, so if we went someplace, if we went to Colorado, we didn't go skiing, we went to Yellowstone National Park, or the Grand Tetons, or Yosemite. Because my dad loved the outdoors and my dad hunted, so I kind of get that stuff from the experiences you have as a kid growing up. And I'm fortunate enough that the things we were around as kids were Williamsburg, Annapolis, the Grand Tetons, and you know all those sort of National Parks sites. I was born in Baltimore and I remember one of my favorite things in school was once a year we

got to go to Ft. McHenry, so some time around second or third or fourth grade I was hooked, I was a history guy.

**Benton:**        Alright, well thank you so much for your time Mr. Tarmey.

**Tarmey:**        My pleasure.

[End of transcription]