

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE CECIL

Interview Conducted by: Linda Lamp & Bill Treasurer (Leadership Asheville 26)
Date: Monday, October 29, 2007

1. In what ways did the Vanderbilt family impact WNC that you are most proud of?

They were very instrumental in opening up WNC because they helped create awareness of the area beyond being a health resort (which is what it was known for prior to their arrival). When George Vanderbilt developed the estate and built Biltmore House it was the biggest thing ever to happen in this part of the state and it made national headlines. Soon George became very involved in philanthropic efforts and other good works. He funded All Souls church, for example, and was part of the vestry. He built the church as an integral part of Biltmore Village because as a very religious man, he knew how important it would be to have a church as the center of the community. Every Sunday he would be one of the Vestrymen passing the collection plate (which soon became somewhat of a local attraction!).

George Vanderbilt founded the Clarence Barker Memorial Hospital (Biltmore Hospital), and the hospital which was run by the All Souls vestry.

In addition, he was responsible for building the YMI on Eagle Street.

2. What have been the most notable examples of successful collaboration that you have witnessed in Asheville during your lifetime?

After the war the city, county, the chamber of commerce, and other rural organizations saw the need to start a development organization to help develop the western part of our state. The desire was to boost the economy of the entire region. The Chamber of Commerce had heard of a similar effort in Tupelo, Mississippi, so they sent two members of the agricultural committee there to find out how they'd done it.

We were overwhelmed by what they had done. So we brought what we had learned back to the Chamber and everyone agreed that it would be something that we should do here. The Chamber hired Doane Agriculture Service out of St. Louis, Missouri to come and conduct a survey in the mountains. Doane sent a gentleman by the name of Mac McGough to handle the survey for our area. The Chamber was so impressed with his work they contacted Mac McGough and hired him to come to mountains to implement the results of the survey. A presentation was given to over 600 people during lunch at the city auditorium and nearly everyone supported the idea.

WNC Development Association ended up spawning many other successful projects, including WNC Ag Center, WNC Farmer's Market, NC Arboretum, completion of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the I-26 Connector. The community development model used in Buncombe County was also shared successfully with the other counties throughout the mountains

It is the finest example that I can think of as a model for bringing disparate organizations together for the common good of the community.

Interview conducted for use by Leadership Asheville. Do not reuse without permission.



3. What has been your most enjoyable leadership effort?

- Raising My Children.
- WNC Development Association, which is now WNC Communities.
- Carolina Day School.
- Mission Hospital.

4. What does Asheville mean to you?

It's home.

Asheville is a great place to be.

I can't think of any place that I'd prefer to live than here. It is such a diverse community, which is one of Asheville's most compelling features and a real success story. The revitalization of Asheville's downtown is remarkable. Because of the dedication of many people, Asheville has a thriving and vibrant downtown community, something which other larger cities can't boast of.

5. What would be the best opportunity on the horizon that you see to be beneficial for Asheville?

The best opportunity would be to pursue broadband technology and tie into this high tech world. Once this is established, we can attract more high tech businesses with higher payrolls. This would help the community tremendously. There is just not enough land available for large manufacturing businesses.

6. What are the qualities that you admire most in a leader?

Honesty is key, someone who is a straight-shooter and energetic. A person you can count on to do what they say they are going to do, not a procrastinator.

7. What do you think Asheville can do to continue developing future leaders in today's challenging and ever changing environment?

Leadership Asheville is a splendid program to develop future leaders for our area. Biltmore Farms recommends all their key people go through Leadership Asheville. I was one of the first to go through Leadership Asheville for Seniors and found it to be a good opportunity for interaction with other leaders in our area. It would be advantageous to keep the classes small for plenty of opportunity for interaction.

8. What is a critical experience that every leader should have?

Leaders should not only learn from their successes, but learn from their failures, because this makes a seasoned leader.

Interview conducted for use by Leadership Asheville. Do not reuse without permission.



9. What is one of Asheville's most significant successes?

Creating a thriving downtown has been a tremendous success for Asheville. One that has been years in the making and is a model for other cities.

Interview conducted for use by Leadership Asheville. Do not reuse without permission.

