

"A TIME BEFORE NOW"

New mural connects to shared history

HISTORY &
CULTURE
TRAIL

Photos and story by Amanda Karioth Thompson, Arts Consultant

They say you can never go home again. For Joe Cowdrey, that concept holds special significance.

Cowdrey grew up in Tallahassee. He graduated from Tallahassee Community College after taking as many art classes as his schedule would allow. He started his career as a professional artist in our community and though he moved to New Jersey three years ago, he considers Tallahassee home and often returns to visit family.



It took Cowdrey three weeks to complete the 200-foot-long mural, which runs parallel to FAMU Way between Conklin Street and Pinellas Street.

He's watched Tallahassee and the surrounding area change and often uses that evolving landscape as inspiration for his paintings.

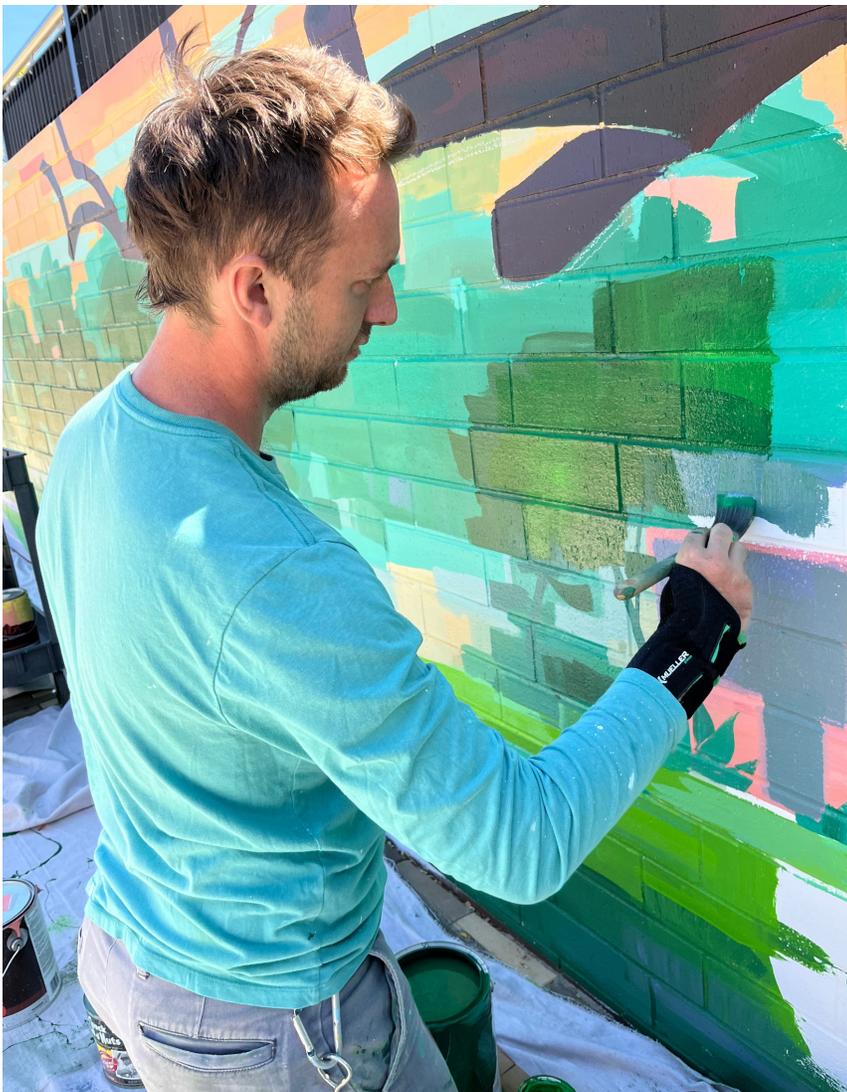
Cowdrey was recently given a unique opportunity to create a mural commemorating the Seaboard and Stearns-Mosley neighborhoods, an area that experienced a significant change in the last 50 years. Located on the Southside of Tallahassee, these African American neighborhoods were once vibrant and thriving. Now, little remains of the area so many called home.

Though much has been lost, the Blueprint Intergovernmental Agency's History and Culture Trail (HCT) project seeks to recognize and honor the historical contributions and cultural impact of the communities adjacent to the FAMU Way Corridor, an east-west roadway from South Monroe Street to Lake Bradford Road.

The History and Culture Trail is part of the Blueprint Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 project and is expected to be completed in 2023. The HCT represents a \$1.1 million investment that leverages a \$315 million Blueprint infrastructure investment in the Southside. Once complete, the History and Culture Trail will join a host of amenities along FAMU Way, including the Skateable Art Park, the Coal Chute Pond Trail, a playground, the new St. Marks Trailhead and more.

After years of extensive research and community involvement, informational panels will be installed along the 1.5-mile History and Culture Trail to display images and historical material about the neighborhoods, businesses and individuals who lived and worked in the area. The trail will also include 12 new pieces of public art which are vital in further enhancing and interpreting historical accounts while offering additional opportunities for engagement.

The inclusion of art into any environment plays a significant role in sustaining cultural identity and creating a sense of place. The return on investment is substantial. Public art serves as a tourism driver, encourages lasting economic growth, and contributes to business development. It fosters community pride, connects citizens to their shared history, and makes cultural heritage a tangible community asset.



Joe Cowdrey at work on the mural titled “A Stroll Down Seaboard Street.”

Though Cowdrey had some initial hesitations, he responded to the open call for proposals developed by the Council on Culture & Arts in partnership with Blueprint.

“I was unsure if I even felt comfortable tackling the project. But I kept coming back to it. I was trying to figure out how I’d tell that story or even if it’s a story I can tell,” Cowdrey said.

Pulling from provided historical materials and his personal experience of living in Frenchtown during a formative time in his life, he created a few small-scale paintings as sketches. “I saw I had the seeds of a design. Something that felt like a part of me mixed with a part of the community that existed here. I decided I’m just going to go for it and see what happens.”

He was one of seven artists selected to create artwork for the History and Culture Trail which will represent one of the most significant infusions of outdoor public art in Tallahassee-Leon County history.



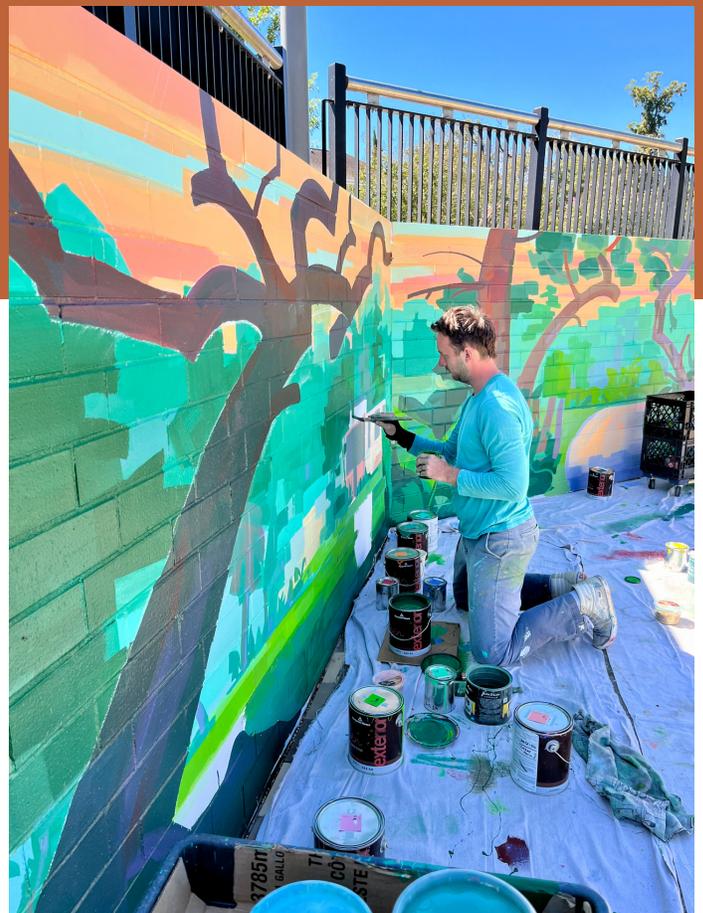
“If there’s a greater meaning behind this mural, it’s about remembering the importance of community. That’s something everyone can relate to and something that can help us get through the darkest of times,” said Cowdrey.

Though he’s completed several murals, this one held extra weight. He refined his design, intentionally leaving room for inspiration to strike while he painted on-site. He wanted the rhythms of contemporary life to inform the spirit he aimed to capture.

“As I was painting, I’d hear sounds, like the train, that hasn’t changed much over the past several decades. I could hear the swings and kids laughing at the nearby playground while I was painting the playground in the mural. It was striking to hear that while I was working on it.”

Attentive viewers will spot Cowdrey’s depiction of the ‘old’ capitol without the ‘new’ capitol rising above it, hinting at an era prior to the 1970s. Cowdrey explained, “I’m not pinpointing a specific time, but it looks like a time before now.”

Viewers will also notice an absence of figures. “I didn’t want it to be about the figures but about the community they built. It’s opened up the idea that the community is still here. The mural is in a space where people will gather,” thereby populating and activating the mural, in three dimensions and in real-time.



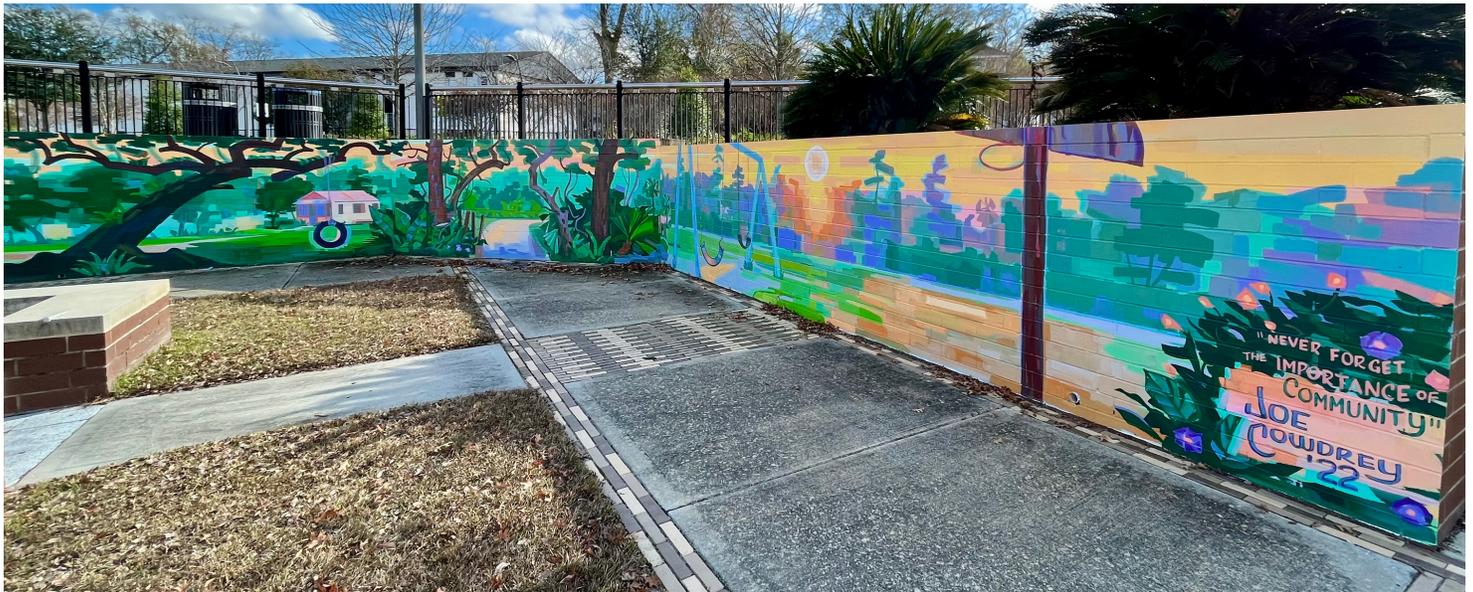
Though he currently lives in New Jersey, Cowdrey grew up in Tallahassee and considers it home.

During the three weeks, it took Cowdrey to complete the 200-foot-long mural, some of those community members visited him and shared memories brought to light by the artwork. One encounter stands out to Cowdrey.

“A fellow was talking with me and told me he grew up in the neighborhood. He started feeling very nostalgic while looking at the piece and conveyed that to me with words but also, I could just tell that he was remembering the past.”

“Though I looked at old photos, the mural design was built out of an imaginative place. One question I did battle with was am I painting the neighborhood correctly. When I painted this piece, it was coming from a place of homesickness and nostalgia. Then seeing somebody else who lived in the community is feeling that same thing, it’s something that every artist aspires to. Seeing the look on this man’s face and how he was really taken back to a place that I was trying to represent was powerful.”

Cowdrey is quick to emphasize that while he will never be able to fully understand what it might have been like to live in these neighborhoods, he can use his personal experiences and artistic skills to honor those who did. “After seeing the way this community has reacted to this piece, I feel like maybe I’ve done that.”



“This is who I am, this is what I do and it’s here in Tallahassee, the place where I’m from, the place I identify as home, the place where I started. That’s really special,” shared Cowdrey.

To learn more about Blueprint’s Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project, click here: <https://blueprintia.org/projects/cct-segment-3-amenities/>