



Putnam County Courthouse. Photo by David Seibert.

Finding Opportunity in a Briar Patch

The Georgia Writers Museum and The Artisans Village



Downtown Eatonton.

Putnam County: Historic Georgia Heartland

A Rich History

Created in 1807, Putnam County was named after General Israel Putnam, a hero of the Revolutionary War. Its capital Eatonton (named for Tripolitan war hero William Eaton) is the hometown of many notable Georgians, including iconic authors Alice Walker and Joel Chandler Harris, Chick-fil-A founder S. Truett Cathy, and Zac Brown of the Zac Brown Band.

Like other cities on the Antebellum Trail, Eatonton has many beautiful historic buildings. The city's residential area features over 100 antebellum and Victorian era structures, including high style examples of Greek Revival, Queen Anne, Folk Victorian and Gothic Revival homes. A stunning Neoclassical Revival style courthouse sits at the center of the town's business district, flanked by picturesque historic storefronts (*above*). Outside the city center are Civil War sites, as well as the millennia-old stone effigy mounds of Rock Eagle and Rock Hawk (the only two such mounds east of the Mississippi River).



Putnam County.

A Need for Economic Revitalization

Putnam County was long supported by three main industries: a Georgia Power coal plant, home building company Horton Homes, and dairy farms, which gave Putnam the nickname “The Dairy Capital of Georgia.” Since 2007, each of these industries has left or significantly reduced its workforce. Pre-Recession, growth in the surrounding lake country created a real estate development boom, encouraging local dairy farmers to close up shop and sell their land to developers. When the recession hit, property values dropped, new development never materialized, and those jobs were not replaced. Horton Homes is pursuing bankruptcy. Most recently, Georgia Power closed its coal-fired power plant due to environmental regulations enacted in 2011. The plant closure resulted in 229 lost jobs and starting in 2016, an estimated \$3.5 million drop in annual tax revenue for the County’s operating budget.

Unsurprisingly, the Georgia Area Labor Profile for Putnam shows a decline in local employment trends since 2007, and both Putnam County and the City of Eatonton have higher unemployment rates and lower median household incomes than the Georgia average (see **Putnam County At-A-Glance**, above). The City of Eatonton’s median household income is a little more than half the state average, and 29.4% of Eatonton residents live below the poverty line. With recent economic changes, some reports even indicate that Putnam County’s current poverty rate is as high as 36% and the unemployment rate is 8.6%, the 2nd highest in Georgia. In addition, 85% of the children in the local school system are considered economically disadvantaged and are on the subsidized lunch program.

In downtown Eatonton’s historic square, 50% (7 out of 14) of the commercial properties directly facing the front of the courthouse on Marion Street, and 25% (3 out of 12) of the properties on S. Jefferson Street directly across from the courthouse to the north, are vacant. Currently, there are few restaurants, retail shops, or ongoing attractions to draw people outside of Eatonton to the historic district.

Putnam County At-A-Glance

	Georgia	Putnam County	Eatonton
Population (2014)	10.1 million	21,192	6,530
Persons below poverty level (2009-2013)	18.2%	14%	29.4%
Median house-hold income (2009-2013)	\$49,179	\$44,764	\$26,891
Unemployment Rate (2013)	7.8%	8.6%	N/A

Data from US Census and Georgia Department of Labor.

An Ideal Place for Tourism

Despite considerable economic challenges, Putnam County and the City of Eatonton are situated in an ideal geographic location for tourism and business. Eatonton is located within 30 minutes of key Georgia tourism draws including the Rock Eagle and Rock Hawk Effigies; Flannery O'Connor's Andalusia; Lakes Oconee and Sinclair; and the towns and attractions of Milledgeville, Greensboro, and Madison, Georgia. Each year, hundreds of thousands of visitors are drawn to the surrounding lake country, enticed by award-winning golf courses at places like Cuscowilla Golf Resort and Reynolds Plantation, access to swimming, boating, hiking, camping, and fishing, and by luxury accommodations like the Ritz Carlton Lodge. Eatonton is also within ninety minutes of the major metropolitan areas of Atlanta, Augusta, Athens, and Macon.

The Solution: Capitalizing on Putnam County’s Unique Assets

In 2012, a group of concerned citizens reached out to the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD) for advice on the best way to bolster the local economy. After an in-depth assessment, the assigned GDEcD Economic Development Resource Team recommended investing in tourism, specifically arts tourism, given Putnam County’s location and heritage.

The Eatonton-Putnam Tourism Arts Heritage Partnership and the Briar Patch Arts Council

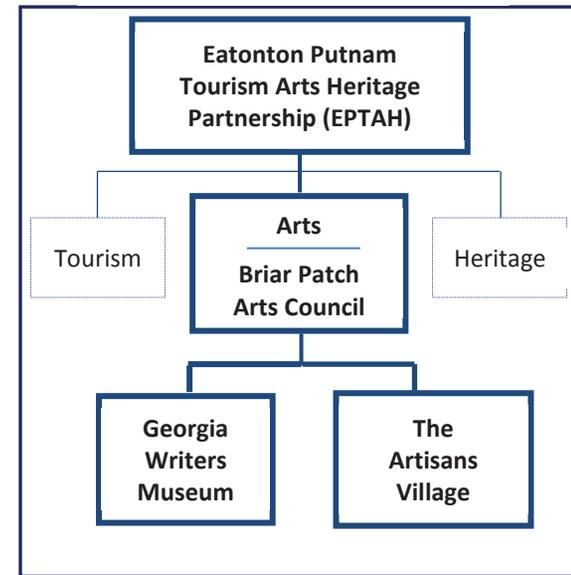
In response, community leaders, with the City and County Governments, Chamber of Commerce, Board of Education, Putnam Development Authority, the local newspaper and 6 other individuals established the Eatonton-Putnam Tourism Arts Heritage Partnership (EPTAH). Its mission is to generate ideas to revitalize the region through increased cultural tourism. Governed by a 13-person Board of Directors, EPTAH established three distinct working committees: Arts, Tourism, and Heritage.

The Briar Patch Arts Council, born from efforts of that original EPTAH Arts Committee, incorporated in 2013 as an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation and founded the Georgia Writers Museum (GWM) and The Artisans Village (TAV). Both GWM and TAV have been established as separate 501(c)(3) non-profit corporations, and each of the three entities has its own Board of Directors (see *Exhibit A*).

The Georgia Writers Museum and The Artisans Village

Detailed on the following pages, GWM and TAV are new non-profit tourism ventures that will boost the economies and communities of downtown Eatonton and greater Putnam County. Both celebrate the unique cultural resources of our region. GWM honors Georgia authors, with a special emphasis on the works of local writers Joel Chandler Harris, Flannery O’Connor, and Alice Walker. TAV highlights and supports local artists and craftsmen. They are strategically located on either side of the courthouse to generate foot traffic that will support retail and restaurants and create new jobs at tourist venues and retail operations.

Organizational Structure



The Georgia Writers Museum

Inspired by the Dublin Writers Museum, which focuses on the Irish literary tradition, the Georgia Writers Museum (GWM) showcases the lives, works, and accomplishments of famous Georgia writers. GWM operates from a temporary storefront in downtown Eatonton, and features permanent displays dedicated to area authors Alice Walker, Joel Chandler Harris, and Flannery O'Connor, as well as revolving displays dedicated to other Georgia writers. Additional attractions include a small library of regional literature donated by a supporter, and temporary displays of archival works from university collections, public archives, and private sources.

Since the museum opened in 2014, it has offered programming that both raises community awareness of Georgia's literary heritage and provides educational opportunities for locals and visitors. Examples of past programming efforts include:

- author readings and book signings, including a reading by Georgia Poet Laureate Judson Mitcham;
- an annual creative writing contest, with a grand prize of a year-long mentorship with a professional writer;
- poetry nights;
- writing workshops conducted by professional literary instructors;
- several lecture series on the literary lives and achievements of GWM's featured writers, and other writers in the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame conducted by faculty from Georgia College and State University, the University of Georgia, and Emory University;
- book publishing guidance and resources to writers seeking to publish their works; and
- Summer children's writing workshops offered with Putnam County School programs.



BPAC Board Members prepare the current site.



Alice Walker display with memorabilia on loan from Georgia College.

GWM has reached out to many local and regional literary organizations to expand its impact and learn from others. Friends and partners include the Uncle Remus Museum, Eatonton Main Street, the Eatonton-Putnam County library, and the Southern Literary Trail. GWM also has a website, email list, and an active Facebook page with over 420 fans.

Capital Improvements

The museum currently operates from a temporary storefront in downtown Eatonton. In June 2013, the GWM Board secured a long-term lease and partnership agreement with the Putnam County Board of Commissioners for use of the three-floor, 9,000-square-foot historic Eatonton Hotel as the museum's permanent new home. Exciting renovation plans are now underway to restore this beautiful Classical Revival style historic property.

When complete, the building will be designed as follows (see *Exhibit C* for floor plans):

- **1st floor:** A gift shop, bookstore, café, and general exhibits area.
- **2nd floor:** Three rooms devoted to the lives and works of Harris, O'Connor, and Walker, including photographs, artifacts, manuscripts, and first editions. Additional rooms will honor prominent Georgia writers, both current authors and those in the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame.
- **3rd floor:** Rooms for conferences, workshops, readings, lectures and creative writing programs suitable for all age groups.

Architectural plans will be donated by Steven L. Kippels, a Georgia Registered Architect with extensive commercial and residential architectural experience. President of Kippels & Associates since 1988, Steven has worked on renovations for the Hurt Building in Atlanta; the U.S. Embassy in Bonn, Germany; various school projects for Atlanta Public Schools; and the Wards Chapel Church as-built drawings.



Eatonton Hotel.



2014 Putnam County Dairy Festival, with the Eatonton Hotel in the background.



Eatonton Hotel interior shot.

The renovated building will be completely handicapped-accessible, with an ADA compliant elevator. The structure's existing hand-hewn beams and rough brick walls will be incorporated and enhanced, creating a rustic backdrop for unique, state-of-the-art interactive exhibits. A long-term goal is to incorporate ViziTech USA's unique 3D technology into the museum's displays (ViziTech, USA is owned by BPAC Vice President General (ret) Stewart Rodeheaver).

The Eatonton Hotel is directly across from the Courthouse and a short walk to the Uncle Remus Museum, the Eatonton-Putnam County library, the Plaza Arts Center, the Chamber of Commerce, and many historic homes, churches and local businesses. Once housed in the new location and operating at full capacity, GWM will provide a literary centerpiece for Putnam County and the State of Georgia.



GWM's part-time director gives a tour of the current museum.

The Artisans Village

To create an interesting “destination” for residents and tourists, The Artisans Village (TAV) will provide live demonstrations of artisan crafts that aren’t commonly seen, such as glassblowing, blacksmithing, metal working, and furniture making. In exchange for artists offering these demonstrations and classes to the public, they will receive discounted studio space. In addition, a retail gallery will display and sell art on a commission basis, generating income for both artists and TAV.

The ultimate goal is to create an active community where artisans in various disciplines can create, network and demonstrate their artistic skills, as well as market their creations. The affordable studio space and vibrant community will appeal to Georgia’s creative talent, while the artisans’ work and the interactive, educational venue will appeal to creative locals, tourists and art lovers.

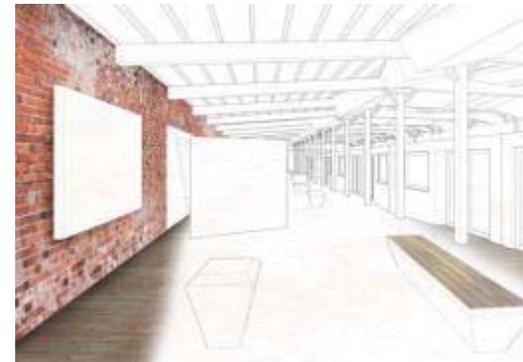
TAV’s board has researched successful business models and obtained input from artists of various disciplines through focus groups, interviews and visits to other art guilds. They have gleaned insights into barriers commonly faced by the artisan sector, complexities of artisans’ space/design needs for various art media, and operational innovations appropriate for artisan stakeholders. All of this research has been used to craft a sustainable business plan, which will include a combination of revenues from studio rental fees, sales commissions, individual donations, and grants.

Capital Investment

BPAC and TAV Boards have identified two adjacent buildings totaling 20,100 square feet that will serve as the new home of the Village. The buildings are ideally located in downtown Eatonton: adjacent to Eatonton’s planned outdoor event stage; one block away from the town square with local shops, restaurants, and businesses; within two blocks of the GWM and the Plaza Arts Center; and a short walk away from the



Future TAV main building entrance.



Potential uses of the space (renderings by GA Tech students).

Uncle Remus Museum. TAV is currently working with the property owner to buy the buildings, and once this is completed, will renovate the buildings into usable studio space for artists.



The future site of TAV. TAV's two red brick structures are surrounded by a newly paved parking lot with 80 spaces. To the left are several downtown shops and restaurants; just beyond the two buildings, the City of Eatonton will build a new outdoor event stage for concerts.

Preliminary Building Designs

TAV sought out and was selected by the Architecture Foundation of Georgia - Community Service Outreach Committee to receive technical and architectural support and recommendations for both buildings. Through this relationship, TAV established partnerships with the Schools of Architecture at Southern Polytechnic State University (Southern Poly) and the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech). Both schools set up independent design competitions for the interior and exterior of the buildings.

In fall 2014, Southern Poly undergraduate students developed architectural vision statements for their Senior Capstone credits showing how the two historic buildings might be redesigned and used for maximum impact and utility,. Students rendered four separate architectural drawings and 3-D models of the buildings, which were then reviewed by focus groups composed of artists from various disciplines.

The focus group feedback was then provided to Georgia Tech, whose graduate-level architectural students completed interior and exterior architectural designs during spring semester 2015. Upon final negotiations of the building purchase agreement, the Georgia Tech student renderings will be given to the architectural firm selected to finalize the renovation plans (see **Exhibit F**). The renovated main building will contain:

- working studio space for artists
- art galleries to showcase artist work
- retail sales area for products, artworks, and gifts
- meeting / conference space
- a café/event space
- a tourist information kiosk

The second, smaller “livery” building will be modified to accommodate studios involving high-noise and/or high temperature work, such as woodworking, blacksmithing, and glassblowing.

Capital Campaign Budget

Renovating the GWM and TAV buildings will cost a combined \$1.75 million (see **Exhibits D and G** for detailed budgets).

Capital Campaign	Cost
Georgia Writers Museum	\$788,000
The Artisans Village	\$807,000
Purchase of TAV buildings	\$135,000
Fees and expenses for campaign	\$20,000
Total	\$1,750,000

The Pillars of a Sustainable Future

Experienced Leadership

The Board Members of GWM, TAV, and BPAC bring a tremendous combination of skills to their respective organizations. The executive leaders of BPAC, TAV and GWM are summarized here; biographies of all board members are shown in **Exhibit B**:

- BPAC's Chairman of the Board is **Lou Benjamin**. Prior to retirement, Lou was the Managing Partner and founder of a company that specialized in placing junior military officers into civilian careers. He was responsible for all corporate operations including marketing, administration, and strategy, and designed leadership development programs for over 100 major corporations.
- TAV's President is **Kevin Tomson-Hooper**. In 2012, Kevin completed a 37-year career in non-profit administration and management as the Executive Director of Social Services for The Salvation Army Southeastern Region's corporate headquarters. He also serves on the Board of Directors of the Architecture Foundation of Georgia.
- **Jack Shinneman** is the Founder and President of GWM. Jack served as Senior Vice President of Finance at Bristol-Myers Squibb, and then Chief Financial Officer of Zimmer, the medical device business, for 10 years. Later, Jack served as President of Zimmer International, with annual sales of \$500 million and 1,000 employees.

GWM currently employs a part-time director. Eventually, GWM and TAV will employ one full-time "shared" director. All other staffing needs will be provided by community volunteers and independent contractors. When operations reach a level that volunteer hours cannot adequately cover service requirements, additional staff will be hired.

Strategic Marketing

Marketing strategies will include, but are not limited to: maintaining an active social media presence; linking to tourism bureaus in Georgia; advertising in regional newspapers; distributing promotional brochures and rack cards to hotels and tourist centers; linking to websites of local hotels; radio and television commercials; co-marketing with other regional art venues; and coordinating with other community programs to develop complimentary venues / events.

Strong Community Partnerships

From the beginning, BPAC has recognized the need to develop strong partnerships with other organizations. We have forged good relationships with the governments of Putnam County and the City of Eatonton, as well as our local state representatives. The owner of the local newspaper, the Eatonton Messenger and its parent company Smith Communications, is on the EPTAH Board and is a supporter. We will continue to work with local and state tourism departments to promote our projects, and have kept in touch with members of the 2012 GDEcD Economic Development Resource Team. We also have spoken to the local Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, the Uncle Remus Museum, the Eatonton-Putnam County Chamber of Commerce, the Eatonton Putnam Arts Foundation (which supports The Plaza Arts Center), and many other local organizations and individuals.

In particular, BPAC and its subsidiaries have developed a rewarding partnership with the Eatonton Main Street Program, a local arm of the National Trust's Main Street Program. One recent result of this partnership is the Main Street Art Program, a collaboration between Eatonton Main Street and TAV. Starting in mid-September 2015, 12 empty storefront windows in downtown Eatonton will be filled with work by local artisans, along with advertisements for TAV. Two windows also have been reserved for students of the local high school (part of the Putnam County Charter School System). This is one example of how we will combine fulfillment of our mission and marketing with the goals of the broader community.

Make the Solution a Reality

In the last five years, Eatonton-Putnam County has had an amazing success story with its schools moving from the troubled school list to 11th in the State and receiving a 2015 award from Lt. Governor Cagle for innovation. The recently restored Plaza Arts Center has attracted visitors from the surrounding area for plays, classes and exhibits. The new event space adjacent to The Artisans Village will attract outdoor concert-goers and festivals. There is good availability of labor and land, and a low cost of living, a beautiful courthouse square, and architecturally significant buildings, homes and gardens.

Creating a vibrant downtown place, to live, work and enjoy for employers, employees and their children will make Putnam County an even more desirable place for businesses looking to expand or relocate. The opening of the Georgia Writers Museum and the creation of The Artisans Village will help restore three historic properties and put them to use again, and revitalize an entire community in the process.

The Briar Patch Arts Council has accepted the challenge to create venues that will attract cultural tourism, but we need your help to make this vision a reality. Please join us in celebrating our region and its unique past. Local artists and artisans will be given new opportunities to create and show their work, and an important part of Georgia's heritage will be made available to a greater number of people today and in the future.