

**LEVERAGING PUBLIC  
INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS**

The Role of Arts-based Economic  
Development Strategies in Rural  
Georgia Communities

**PARADISE GARDEN  
PASAQUAN**



A division of the  
Georgia Department of  
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## PARADISE GARDEN AND PASAQUAN – Artists’ Environments Boost Tourism

In 1977, Howard Finster and Eddie Owen Martin were invited to attend an event for folk artists at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. A contingent from Georgia – led by then Georgia First Lady Mary Beth Busbee – met at the airport to fly up together. The way Martin – who called himself St. EOM – tells it, he showed up at the airport in his traditional Indian regalia and they went “by procession” onto the plane.

**“Mrs. Busbee had me by the right arm, and the Reverend Finster was on the other side of her. And he was blowin’ a harp, and I was beatin’ on my African talkin’ drum and chantin’ at the same time as we walked on the plane. I think Mrs. Busbee was kinda startled.”**

– Eddie Owen Martin

This example highlights the personalities of two artists who were known for their eccentricities, and who had just as many similarities as they did differences. Both men were self-taught artists, both were inspired by “visions” from the spiritual world, and both built their homes into artists’ environments that visitors now flock to.

The main similarity between their stories is that both of their homes – Finster’s Paradise Garden and Martin’s Pasaquan – and the art, buildings and structures that went along with them fell into disrepair after their deaths, and in both cases, community groups banded together to try to save and restore the properties.

Those efforts were successful, and now Paradise Garden in Summerville and Pasaquan in Buena Vista are tourist attractions that have helped breathe new life into the communities and have spurred economic development in both small towns. Here is their story.



Howard Finster, a self-taught artist from Chattooga County, sits atop his “Paradise Garden,” a sculpture garden filled with mixed-media creations next to his home in Pennville. Finster began work on the garden in 1961. Photograph by Bud Lee.



Photo of Eddie Martin courtesy of the South-Central Georgia Folklife Project collection (AFC 1982/010), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Photographer: Carl Fleischhauer.

## Paradise Garden

A visit to Paradise Garden today is almost an assault on the senses. With so much to see, the eye doesn't know where to look. Concrete walkways that thread around the property shimmer with pieces of broken glass and mirrors – and maybe the odd fork. Sculptures and statues were created from everything from concrete to textile spindles to Coke bottles and Cadillac hubcaps. Finster also built several buildings, including the Rolling Chair Ramp, the Meditation Chapel, the Mirror House, the Bible House, the Cadillac Shed, the Bottle House and the icon of Paradise Garden, the World Folk Art Church. How he put it all together in a cohesive pattern is probably the reason he has been called a “visionary genius.”



Photo provided by the Paradise Garden Foundation

Reverend Finster, as he was known, settled in Trion, Ga., from Alabama in the late 1930s shortly after he was married. Though he started preaching when he was 16, it became official when he was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1940.

In 1976 Finster, who said he had visions from God from time to time, received one that told him to “paint sacred art.” By that time, he had moved his family to an unincorporated area known as Pennville outside Summerville and called his property Paradise Garden. From that moment on, Finster created art with an evangelical message. Bible verses peppered everything he painted – from buildings in his backyard to paintings to Coke bottles – in what has been described as “preaching with his paintbrush.”

Finster created nearly 47,000 individual works of art over a 26-year period. Artists like Keith Haring visited Paradise

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– Jason Winters, Commissioner, Chattooga County

Garden. Members of the Athens-based rock group R.E.M. helped Finster with his garden and shot the first video for their song “Radio Free Europe” there. Finster collaborated with R.E.M. lead singer Michael Stipe on the album cover for *Reckoning*. Finster also painted the cover art and promotional images for the Talking Heads’ album *Little Creatures*.

Finster died in 2001, and his property changed hands several times. Built on a swamp, a small army of volunteers could not maintain what Finster created, and Paradise Garden began falling apart.

Enter leaders from Chattooga County – led by Sole Commissioner Jason Winters – who stepped up to figure out a way to save Paradise Garden.

“When Paradise Garden was in private ownership, it struggled to get the funding and resources it needed to save it,” says Winters. “People in the community realized it was something worth saving.”



Photo provided by the Paradise Garden Foundation



Photos provided by the Paradise Garden Foundation

**“Paradise Garden has turned into an economic development engine for northwest Georgia, northeast Alabama and southern Tennessee.”**

- Tina Cox, Executive Director

They needed a funding model that would make it feasible for the county to buy Paradise Garden – what Winters calls a “pathway.” Luckily he found that pathway in the form of a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC).

In 2003, Chattooga County acquired four acres of Paradise Garden for \$125,000, including all of the buildings and three adjacent lots. Thanks to another grant from ArPlace America as well as private funding, the county was able to obtain another \$600,000 to restore the buildings and secure much of the collection. The county now owns the land but leases it to the Paradise Garden Foundation for a dollar a year over 50 years.

The foundation hired Jason Poole, a Summerville native who had just overseen the renovation of Mt. Vernon – George Washington’s home in Virginia – as its first executive director. Under Poole’s leadership, the swamp was cleared, buildings were stabilized and restored, and the mosaic pathways were uncovered and additional mosaic sidewalks discovered in the process. Paradise Garden became a tourist attraction.

And that’s just what Winters and others in Chattooga County had hoped would happen. All along, they had been looking for something to jumpstart Chattooga County’s economy.

“During the time we were right in the middle of the recession,” he remembers. “Unemployment in the county was at 17 percent. Our downtown corridor was really suffering. Part of this project was really reaching for anything we could do to increase tourism and increase traffic in our community. We realized this is a great draw for us.”

It worked. Winters says there has been a substantial increase in businesses opening in downtown Summerville since Paradise Garden reopened.

“Paradise Garden has turned into an economic development engine for northwest Georgia, northeast Alabama and southern Tennessee,” says Tina Cox, who took over as executive director in 2018 after Jordan Poole left. “We attract visitors from all over the region, the U.S. and internationally. New businesses including art galleries, restaurants, art studios and shops have opened.”

And it spurred beautification efforts. Harry Harvey, Summerville’s mayor, says the look of downtown has improved with streetscape projects, better signage and murals. “Having people come into downtown enhances what we are doing,” he says. “Visitors spend time and money here. We are fortunate to have Paradise Garden nearby.”

Neighboring Trion has benefitted as well. "Paradise Garden brings major tourism traffic to Trion's restaurants and retailers," says Mayor Larry Stansell, a personal friend of Howard Finster's and supporter of Paradise Garden.

Cox estimates Paradise Garden brings in about 6,500 people annually to Summerville and Trion.

Another big tourism draw is "Finster Fest" a weekend-long arts festival that started in 1991 to celebrate Finster's life. The event lost steam when the property began deteriorating. But it's now back and held at Paradise Garden every Memorial Day weekend, showcasing southern self-taught contemporary artists and folk artists.

"It took awhile to get it going again," she says, "but over the last few years we've really hit our stride. It draws people in from all over. In 2019, we had over 2,100 visitors."

Cox says Paradise Garden's annual operating budget is \$240,000 a year. Income is generated through three fundraisers, including Finster Fest and patron parties in Atlanta and Summerville, as well as admission fees, tours, summer camps, adult art classes, a music concert series, art exhibits and the gift shop. Paradise Garden uses businesses, services and contractors in Chattooga County, stimulating the local economy year-round.

The Paradise Garden Foundation turned a duplex building on the property into two Airbnbs, and final touches are being put on a third one that will serve as both event space and lodging options for those in the area. The Airbnbs bring in additional operating income for Paradise Garden and when not in use, serve as a creative artist residency for artists, writers and musicians.

To Tina Cox, an artist and a personal friend of Howard Finster's, serving as executive director at Paradise Garden to preserve his art and his legacy is an honor.

"I view it more as a privilege, not a job," she says.



Photos provided by the Paradise Garden Foundation



Photo provided by Columbus State University

## Pasaquan

***"I built this place to have somethin' to identify with, 'cause there's nothin' I see in this society that I identify with or desire to emulate. Here I can be in my own world, with my temples and designs and the spirit of God."***

That's how St. EOM describes Pasaquan, the property that was left to him in 1956 when his mother died. He left Buena Vista – a tiny town about 35 miles southeast of Columbus – when he ran away to New York City at age 14.

When he returned home, he began transforming the farmhouse and the surrounding acreage into a place that paid homage to "Pasaquoyanism," a culture that came to him through visions. He created a magical place filled with temples, pagodas, walls and totems that were covered in brightly colored paint. When he wasn't building, he was reading fortunes in the front room of his house to help pay the bills.

"He created Pasaquoyans from his vision and believed they were gender fluid beings from the future," says Mike McFalls, director of Pasaquan and professor of art at Columbus State University. "His ideas of spirituality and philosophy influenced his work. Though he only had an eighth grade education, he was a genius in his own right.

He was extremely curious of culture."

In 1986 the work of St. EOM came to an end when he passed away and his property was bequeathed to the Marion County Historical Society. In 2013, the Historical Society passed it on to the Pasaquan Preservation Society (PPS). Fred Fussell, the head of PPS, wrote to the Kohler Foundation – an organization "committed to the preservation of art environments and important collections" – for consideration for one of their grants. He was denied.

For the next 10 years, Fussell and PPS cobbled together a series of grants to keep the property going – installing a fence and a new roof as well as a security system and a climate control system. They put on a few events that brought in visitors.

"We did what we could to keep the place from completely falling apart," says Fussell, "But we didn't have the expertise or the money to do any more than that."

In 2013, Fussell once again applied to the Kohler Foundation and this time was accepted. The foundation, based in Wisconsin, undertook a multi-million dollar two-year renovation, restoring the property and all of the

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- Debby Ford, President of the Marion County Chamber of Commerce

artwork to its original form.

Kohler brought in a team of experts in preservation and restoration. They also hired students from Columbus State University to help with the project.

One of those students was Charles Fowler, an art major whose primary job was to meticulously match the paint to its original color. “Every structure was repainted,” he says. “However, if there was a piece St. EOM had not finished, it stayed that way.”

Under the grant agreement, PPS was required to turn the property over to the Kohler Foundation, which would find a new entity to maintain and take care of the property. Columbus State University agreed to take it over when the project was complete.

“We had to agree to let it go, and everything would become Kohler’s property,” says Fussell. “We felt good about that.”

Pasaquan is now under the control of the Columbus State Foundation, which is responsible for the operating budget. As director, McFalls is in charge of budget development, programming and curatorial work. Funds are raised annually through events, contributions from Pasaquan



Photos provided by Georgia Municipal Association

visitors, direct fundraising appeals and grant requests. Pasaquan reopened on October 22, 2016, and McFalls says they average about 3,100 visitors per year. They don’t formally charge admission, but ask for a “suggested donation” of \$10. Fowler, who now lives on the property and runs the day-to-day operations, says donations average out to be about \$5 a person.

Like Paradise Garden, the resurrection of Pasaquan has had a positive effect on the community that sits outside its gates.

“People became excited about the re-opening of Pasaquan and the possibility of tourism and the potential of what it could do for Buena Vista,” says Debby Ford, president of the Marion County Chamber of Commerce.

As a result of increased tourism and other factors, she says 24 new businesses have opened since the announcement of Kohler Foundation’s commitment to Pasaquan’s restoration. These include Five Points Berries Winery, the Front Porch Coffee Club, the Swamp Fox Distilling Company, People’s Bank of Georgia, The Performance Academy and several other shops and businesses. Four buildings have also been restored around the square. Ford has applied for and received several Georgia Department of Economic Development Tourism Product Development grants, among other grants, to help carry out various efforts. They are currently waiting to hear on one that would fund a new streetscape project.

“Having something that people are interested in seeing – like an arts based environment – is the engine that helps pull the train for tourism and economic growth,” she says.





Photos provided by Georgia Municipal Association

And McFalls hopes to keep bringing people to Pasquan and Buena Vista with programming. Columbus State runs a Resident Artist Program that assists artists in the creation of new works inspired by Pasquan and St. EOM. One artist even created “Eddie’s Stone Song” a Pasaquoyan Opera, which premiered over two evenings and brought in over 470 guests. In 2019, the first “Pasafest” – a music and art festival – was held at Pasquan. McFalls reports that 750 people were on site that day. He hopes it will become a yearly event.

Like Cox, McFalls is happy to be doing his part to preserve the legacy of one of Georgia’s well-known visionaries.

“Pasquan gives you an inside look into how St. EOM lived and worked,” he says. “He took basic materials and



Photo provided by Columbus State University

**“ Pasquan gives you an inside look into how St. EOM lived and worked. He took basic materials and transformed them in art. He was a true visionary. ”**

– Mike McFalls, director of Pasquan and professor of art at Columbus State University