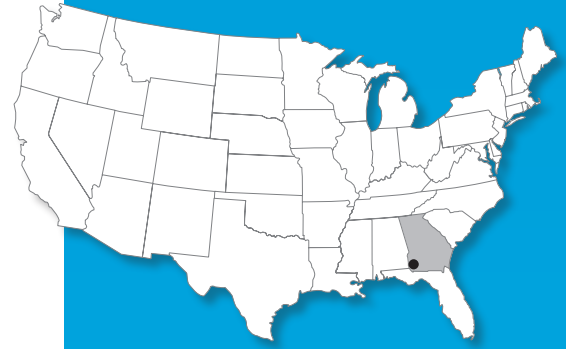


# Colquitt, Georgia



	Colquitt
Population (2000)	1,940
Municipal budget (2005)	2.5 million <sup>69</sup>
Per capita income (2000)	\$18,300
Median household income (2000)	\$24,800
Poverty rate (2000)	26 %
Minority population (2000)	45%
Proximity to urban center	63 miles to Tallahassee, Fla.
Proximity to interstate highway	50 miles
Strategic approach	Tourism Creative economy
Time frame	1992–2006

For four weekends in the fall and spring of each year, tens of thousands of people descend on Colquitt for *Swamp Gravy*,<sup>70</sup> a musical play that celebrates life in rural southwestern Georgia. “Northerners tell stories in private and call it therapy,” said Richard Geer, the creator of *Swamp Gravy*. “Southerners tell stories in public and call it swapping lies.”<sup>71</sup> With a cast of more than 100 local volunteers, *Swamp Gravy* tells the history of Colquitt. The play has sold more than 120,000 tickets and generated well over \$4 million since it began in 1993. The local arts council has reinvested revenues from the production into the revitalization of downtown buildings and the renovation of a local mini-mall, where vendors of arts, crafts and antiques have access to affordable rental space. In 1994 the state legislature designated *Swamp Gravy* the official folk life play of Georgia.

## The community and its history

Colquitt is a rural farming community in Miller County. Historically this region’s livelihood has been fueled by the peanut industry (both farming and processing), augmented with some textile manufacturing. As the farm economy faltered through the mid-1980s, Colquitt’s residents were left with historically low incomes and a downtown struggling to support businesses.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Corey Thomas, city manager, Colquitt, Ga., January 9, 2006.

<sup>70</sup> “Swamp Gravy” is the name coined by local Dot Wainwright, who describes it as “a stew-like dish that is made from pouring fish drippings that you have left in the grease after frying fish. Then you add tomatoes, potatoes, onions, and whatever else you have on hand and make a side dish or it could even be the whole meal if you don’t have enough fish for everyone. So basically, you take whatever you have and make something out of it, which is what we have done in Colquitt, Georgia, with our rendition of ‘Swamp Gravy.’” From “The History of *Swamp Gravy*” at [www.swampgravy.com](http://www.swampgravy.com).

<sup>71</sup> Geer, Richard. “*Swamp Gravy*,” High Performance, 1993, 63.

***Colquitt uses the arts as a tool for community empowerment and economic diversification.***

***The success of a community-based performing arts project has resulted in extensive downtown revitalization and economic development.***

In 1990 a group of civic leaders in Colquitt formed the town's first arts council. The idea for *Swamp Gravy* was hatched in 1991 when Richard Geer, then a graduate student at Northwestern University with no direct ties to the community, met with the Colquitt–Miller County Arts Council. Geer was seeking to test a hypothesis that community-based performing arts and the performing skills of individual people could empower individuals and bring neighborhoods together. The arts council was intrigued by the idea and saw it as an opportunity to help invigorate the local economy. Geer and the arts council drafted a proposal and received a \$15,000 grant from the Georgia Humanities Council. They sought to determine whether community theater could stimulate civic and economic life in an otherwise struggling small town. The first performance took place in October 1992.

### The strategy

*Swamp Gravy* is a play, written and produced by local residents, that depicts the life and history of Colquitt. The strategy behind *Swamp Gravy* was to let people tell their stories and the story of their community, strengthening community ties in the process.<sup>72</sup> *Swamp Gravy* relies exclusively on local volunteers to create the script and produce the musical. The script is a collection of local stories submitted by residents and fashioned together by a professional playwright. Each year the theme of the play changes slightly to incorporate new stories, but the basic weaving of stories remains the same. The use of local actors and crew members creates devotion to the common goal of improving the community, while the reliance on contributions from community members to make up the script gives other residents a sense of involvement in and ownership of the play.

The Colquitt–Miller County Arts Council deliberately structured *Swamp Gravy* to involve and empower local residents with the goal of stimulating civic and economic life in the depressed town. This did not happen overnight; it was difficult for many local residents to accept the idea that cultural tourism was a valid means to economic development. “It was critical early on to have a few local residents and council members working hard to help other residents understand how the arts could give the town a boost,” said Jennifer Trawick, executive director of *Swamp Gravy*.

In 1992 *Swamp Gravy* first took the stage in Cotton Hall, a 60-year-old cotton warehouse. As of 2005, *Swamp Gravy* had sold more than 120,000 tickets (72 percent to out-of-town visitors) and added an estimated \$4 million to the local economy. In an average year, 40,000 people come to Colquitt to see the play. Cultural tourism now provides more jobs and revenue than any other industry in Colquitt. The arts council has reinvested over \$1 million in downtown renovations and building projects, including a total renovation of Cotton Hall. A children's theater spin-off from *Swamp Gravy* was developed to give local kids an opportunity to hone

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<sup>72</sup> “Karen Kimbrel, former executive director of the Colquitt–Miller County Arts Council, quoted in “Swamp Gravy,” [www.southernideabank.org](http://www.southernideabank.org), Southern Growth Policies Board.

their acting skills. The arts council also has created the Swamp Gravy Institute, a consulting and training organization that works with other communities to design programming similar to that in Colquitt.

The arts council has become Colquitt's primary responder to local economic development challenges. In 2001, five downtown businesses were forced to close their doors (mostly because of the declining national economy). "We saw the impact of *Swamp Gravy* during the months it played and decided we should look to year-round opportunities that might help stabilize businesses," Trawick said. In an effort to further diversify the local economy beyond seasonal performance art, the arts council now operates a local bed and breakfast, a mini-mall for local vendors, a storytelling museum, a mural project and the children's theater.

Finally, the experience of being involved with *Swamp Gravy* has inspired local volunteers to take on new challenges to benefit the community. The New Visions Coalition, a nonprofit after-school program created by two former cast members, offers an innovative program that tutors and provides substance-abuse counseling to local youth. Another group of former cast members has formed a community development corporation to focus on Colquitt's housing needs. In December 2006, this new organization will break ground on a 32-unit affordable housing apartment complex.

### What are the lessons from this story?

***Strategically designed arts programs can catalyze economic development.*** Colquitt began with a vision of a community theater program that would stimulate economic and civic growth. The community created a specific plan to involve community members, specified what kinds of outcomes it expected and determined how the program would give back to the community. Stakeholders discussed and planned the causal chain of events ahead of time – beginning with the specific design of *Swamp Gravy* and continuing to the community capacity and economic growth that they hoped the play would foster. Colquitt did not rely on a shaky assumption that creating an arts program would cure the town's economic problems. Organizations considering using the arts as a tool to empower and strengthen their communities should think deliberately about how the program will be structured and what the process will be to achieve desired results.

***Small towns can use the arts to build community capital and defuse racial tensions.*** In small communities, the process of designing and executing performance art can provide unifying activities that connect folks in town. According to the Southern Growth Policies Board: "*Swamp Gravy* has won wide acclaim as an innovative way of bringing people together. The process, telling one's story and/or working on the production (either onstage or behind the scenes), has served to form strong bonds among people, crossing racial, gender and class

lines. Breaking down racial barriers in the community is, in fact, considered part of the program's mission."<sup>73</sup> In communities where racial tensions stand in the way of economic progress, the performing arts can provide a neutral space for breaking down traditional barriers and building new partnerships.

## Contact information

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<sup>73</sup> See [www.southernideabank.org/items.php?id=2569](http://www.southernideabank.org/items.php?id=2569).