



# DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

*An Economic Analysis of the  
Proposed Ocmulgee National Park and Preserve*



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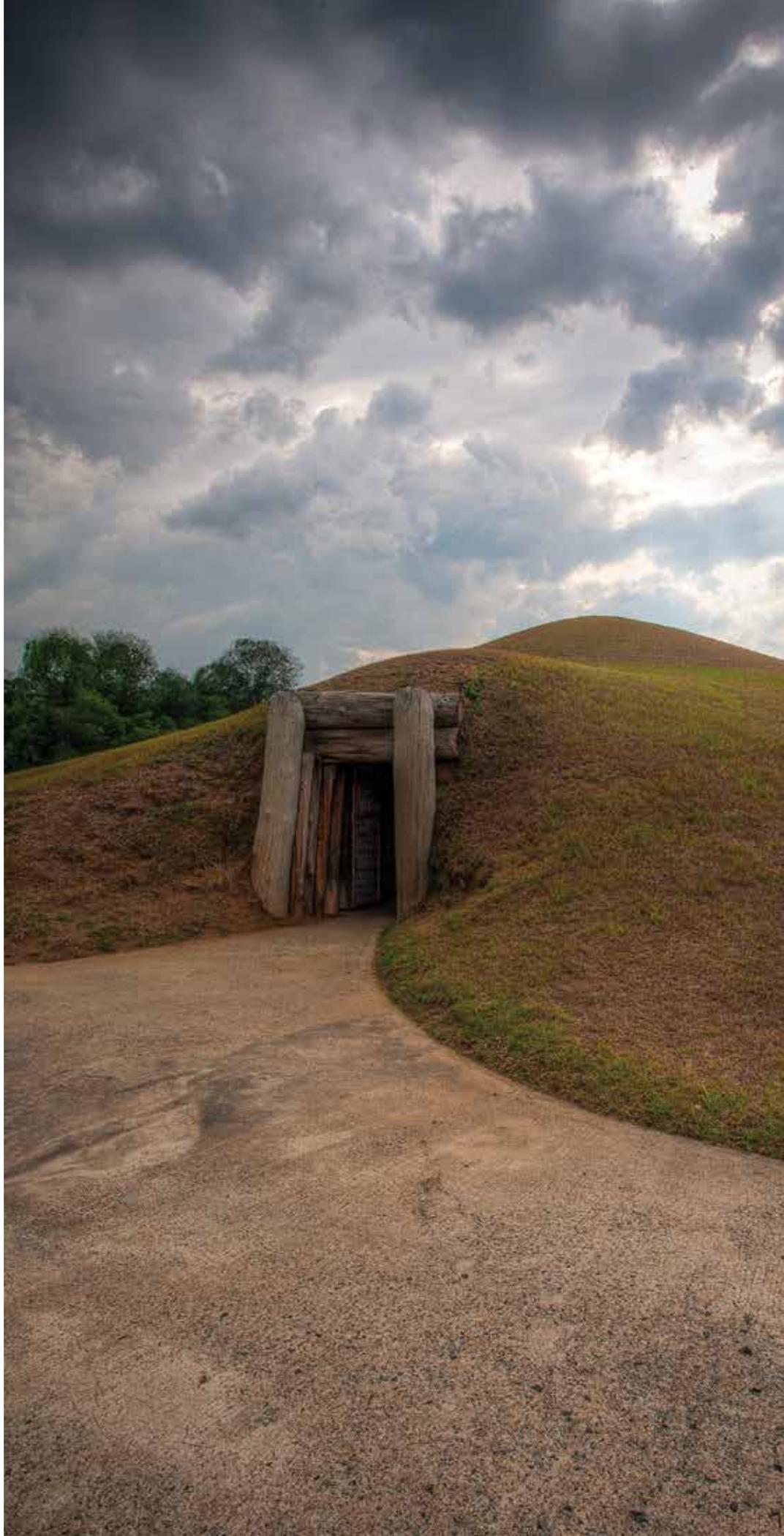
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**Front Cover (Top L-R):** Two Wood Storks,  
Ocmulgee National Monument ©Dan Vickers •  
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River paddler ©Julian Buckmaster **(Bottom):**  
Great Temple Mound, Ocmulgee National  
Monument ©Sharman Ayoub **Left Page:**  
Ceremonial Earth Lodge, Ocmulgee National  
Monument ©Mike Nalley





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## Executive Summary

Middle Georgia grassroots organizations have proposed the creation of an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve that would consolidate the Ocmulgee National Monument with other public lands along the Ocmulgee River between Macon and Hawkinsville. To evaluate this proposal's potential economic effects, a study was commissioned by National Parks Conservation Association, funded in part by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Economists at the University of Tennessee Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics used the IMPLAN economic model to generate growth projections over a 15-year period comparing a hypothetical "National Park & Preserve" against a "No National Park & Preserve" scenario. Their findings indicate that, if created by Congress, an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve could have significant impact on the regional economy. *(See Chart next page.)*

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**A growing body of research demonstrates that gateway communities near protected public lands, such as national parks, can cultivate competitive economic advantages over similar communities without such features. The key is to begin forging a long-term regional vision and to start systematically working toward it.**

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A National Park & Preserve could lead to a six-fold increase in visitation within 15 years and add \$206.7 million in annual economic activity, defining a new trajectory for middle Georgia. The majority of this economic activity—about 90 percent—would come from increases in visitor spending associated with a number of key activities: heritage tourism, bicycling, paddling, camping, fishing, wildlife watching, hiking, hunting, and horseback riding. Business sectors most likely to expand or multiply within the local economy include restaurants, hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts, vacation rentals, campgrounds, sporting goods outfitters, retailers, and tours/outing services.

The Ocmulgee Heritage Trail and Ocmulgee River Water Trail have even greater potential than currently recognized to be integral to a National Park & Preserve and serve as primary drivers of recreation-based economic activity. Macon and middle Georgia also possess several additional, often-underappreciated features that could add up to a suite of unmatched educational, recreational, and heritage tourism attractions coalescing around an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve.

A growing body of research demonstrates that gateway communities near protected



public lands, such as national parks, can cultivate competitive economic advantages over similar communities without such features. The key is to begin forging a long-term regional vision and to start systematically working toward it. Although creating a fully realized Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve could take a number of years, active and engaged communities can energize the process and hasten implementation. Nationwide, those gateway communities that actively promote, treasure, and cultivate their national parks and public lands reap the greatest benefits from them.

(Top): Summer Tanager ©Dan Vickers

## Key Findings

Year 15 Projections (2016–2031)	Most Likely Growth Scenario with an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve*	No Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve Scenario**	The Difference = Projected Annual Economic Gains from an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve
<b>Annual Visitation</b>	1,374,653	207,607	+ 1,167,046
<b>Total Annual Economic Activity</b>	\$233.4 million	\$26.7 million	+ \$206.7 million
<b>Annual Labor Income</b>	\$86.7 million	\$10.2 million	+ \$76.5 million
<b>Annual Tax Revenue</b>	\$33.5 million	\$3.7 million	+ \$29.8 million
<b>Annual Jobs Supported</b>	3,171	357	+ 2,814

\* The National Park & Preserve concept would unite and link the Ocmulgee National Monument, Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, and the Oaky Woods, Ocmulgee, and Echeconnee Creek State Wildlife Management Areas.  
 \*\* Under a No Park & Preserve scenario, the existing public lands would continue to operate separately.

# The Hidden Gem in Middle Georgia

The Ocmulgee River in middle Georgia has been a crossroads of human movement, trade, settlement and conflict for about as long as people have been in eastern North America. Today, it remains a distinctive fusion of human history, ecological richness, and natural beauty: *a place like no other in the Southeast.*

The undeveloped hills, chalk prairies, wetlands, and forested swamps surrounding the Ocmulgee River form a corridor of biological diversity and recreational opportunity. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources has identified the river corridor as one of the State's highest priorities for wildlife conservation. With over 85,000 acres of contiguous bottom-land hardwood swamp, it is the largest block of such habitat remaining on the upper coastal plain. It is also a major migratory flyway and home to over 200 species of birds, 100 species of fish, 80 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 50 species of mammals, including middle Georgia's isolated black bear population.

The corridor's cultural heritage is equally remarkable. By all accounts, Native Americans were the first people in the Southeast and the first to arrive on the Macon plateau. When the Ocmulgee National Monument became a unit of the national park system in 1936, it encompassed roughly 700 acres within a larger cultural landscape, one where people have lived or hunted since the last Ice Age.

During the 1930s, the park became the site of the largest archaeological dig in American history, exploring one of the most prominent ceremonial centers of the ancient Mississippian culture dating back to 900 A.D. This exceptional complex of earthen "Indian mounds" includes a 55-foot-high Great Temple Mound which overlooks the Ocmulgee River floodplain, a funeral mound, a spiral mound like no other in North America, and a ceremonial earth lodge whose original thousand-year-old floor is shaped like an eagle. With the help of the Civilian Conservation Corps and other Depression-era jobs programs, Smithsonian archaeologist Arthur R. Kelly led more than 800 men in the discovery of 2.5 million artifacts. Objects including spear points, pottery, clay figurines, bone tools, and shell jewelry were unearthed,



spanning up to 17,000 years of Native American culture.

Settlements associated with the Ocmulgee mounds may have been a point of first contact between Southeastern natives and Europeans when Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto trekked through the area in the 14th century. The Ocmulgee River's historical significance continued to grow through the Colonial period. For a time, it marked the border between the early American frontier and "Indian Country," playing a significant role during the eastern Indian wars and the War of 1812. The river was also the site of conflict during the Civil War.

Today, the Ocmulgee National Monument is considered the cradle of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and is the centerpiece of the only Native American Traditional Cultural Property east of the Mississippi river. Thousands of visitors come to the park annually for the Ocmulgee Indian Celebration, the largest Native American gathering in the southeast. In 2016, the event hosted over 20,000 visitors, a more than 20 percent increase over the 2014 attendance.

## THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF THE PARTS

In addition to legislation reintroduced in the 115th Congress that would enlarge the park by about 2,000 acres, a local grassroots effort has mobilized that seeks to unite and link the Ocmulgee National Monument with other nearby state and federal public lands clustered along the Ocmulgee River. These lands include Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge and the three state wildlife management areas of Oaky Woods, Ocmulgee and Echeconnee Creek. (*See Map-p.16.*)

Consolidating these areas into a single entity, along with their wildlife habitat, cultural resources, and recreational opportunities, could offer increased management efficiency and better visibility and public access. Local advocates have proposed that the end result of such a consolidation could be the designation of an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve, with the globally recognized National Park Service brand boosting the region's profile as a national and international tourism destination.

(Top Left): Black Bear ©Paul Powers | Georgia Wildlife Federation

“We have this unique asset so many people didn’t realize was there. It was over a decade ago when I was in law school that I became aware of the concept of preserving a larger corridor of the river. I’ve been working with the original visionaries ever since. Our goal is a National Park & Preserve, rather than a National Park alone, because maintaining public hunting access is important to so many. We wanted to be able to say, ‘If you hunt, your great grandkids will be able to hunt the same land 50 years from now.’”

“Macon is on a really good track right now. A lot of positive things are happening to address blight and spur local development. The National Park & Preserve could take Macon to another level and make us a destination city where people really want to travel, not just to stay a weekend, but to live here.”

**BRIAN ADAMS**

Macon Attorney, Board President & Founder, Ocmulgee National Park and Preserve Initiative



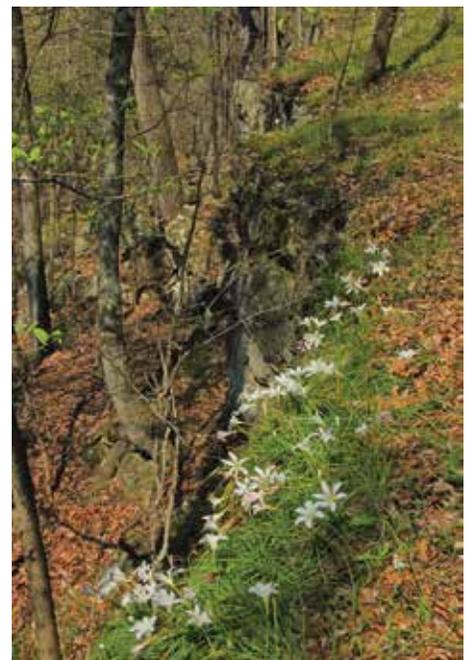
## The National Park & Preserve Concept

National parks have traditionally been areas of great scenic or historical importance protected by Congress for the preservation of natural or cultural resources and for public enjoyment, with strict limitations on resource extraction. Congress has used the title National Preserve to designate areas with characteristics normally associated with a national park, but where certain resource-extractive activities have also been permitted. The idea of a dual designation (a National Park + a National Preserve) originated in Alaska in the 1980s when Congress used it as a way to combine a national park with adjacent areas of similar resource value, but that were also permanently maintained to include public hunting.

Designation of a National Park & Preserve along the Ocmulgee could provide a mechanism for both enhancing protection of exceptional historical resources and preserving in perpetuity the river’s public hunting lands; areas that have been losing substantial acreage in recent years. Additionally, uniting these lands could broaden visitor access to other underutilized and underappreciated special sites. For instance, Brown’s Mount at Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge is a little-visited Native American site related to those at the nearby Ocmulgee National Monument. With more active management and improved interpretation, Brown’s Mount could attract significantly more

visitors. Numerous military heritage sites whose stories are not widely known also dot the river and could be managed in such a way as to become places that draw visitors.

Remarkably, the gateway to all this potential—the Ocmulgee National Monument—is located within the Macon city limits, less than a mile from an interstate exit, making it easily accessible to both the 400,000 residents of the combined Macon-Warner Robins metro areas and to visitors from farther afield.





**SEVERAL POSSIBLE VARIATIONS**

What shape might an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve take? To be clear, the boundary and configuration would be determined by Congress, and only after a thorough public scoping process with numerous opportunities for input from local communities and state, federal and tribal officials. Several designs are possible.

One option would be to consolidate just the existing state and federal lands immediately south of the Ocmulgee National Monument. This would create a National Park & Preserve of about 40,000 acres, almost twice the size of South Carolina’s Congaree National Park, but with several discontinuous pieces.

Alternatively, a larger Park & Preserve could approach 60,000 acres by including areas within the approved expansion boundary of Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, as well as areas previously leased by the state’s wildlife management area system. This alternative might also allow the Park & Preserve to accept wetlands mitigation areas and other conserved properties along the river currently controlled by the Georgia Department of Transportation, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, land trusts or other local entities.

At its largest, a National Park & Preserve might reach 80,000+ acres, if Congress were to authorize the inclusion of areas along the eastern boundary of Robins Air Force Base, to not only preserve the natural and cultural resources, but to protect base missions from the possibility of future incompatible land use change. This largest version of the park would create a truly contiguous unit and might also incorporate

parts of key Ocmulgee River tributaries that have high-quality natural resources such as Big Indian, Echeconnee, and Tobesofkee creeks.

It is important to note that a Congressional boundary determination, whatever its extent, would not immediately result in public ownership. The National Park Service

and local partners would spend several years acquiring pieces through donations or purchases from willing sellers, only as funds became available. Community organizations could speed this process by raising funds from private sources. There has already been some discussion about the possible forms that a public-private partnership might take.



Left Page (Far Left): Relict Trillium ©GA DNR (Top): Wetlands behind Great Temple Mound ©Hao Chen (Left): Brown’s Mount at Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge ©Alan Cressler (Above Left): Little Blue Heron ©Sharman Ayoub (Above Right): Bird-voiced Tree Frog ©GA DNR (Bottom Right): Great Horned Owl ©Sharman Ayoub

# Determining Economic Impacts



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**The economic boost of a National Park & Preserve could chart a new trajectory for middle Georgia, potentially triggering a considerable influx of tourism spending and investment.**

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According to the U.S. Department of the Interior<sup>1</sup>, the National Park System received over 307.2 million recreational visits in 2015. NPS visitors spent \$16.9 billion in local gateway regions (defined as communities within 60 miles of a park). The contribution of this spending to the national economy was \$32 billion in total economic output, \$11.1 billion in labor income, and 295,000 jobs. The National Park Service budget in 2015 was approximately \$2.6 billion, so for every federal dollar invested in the parks over \$10 in economic activity was generated in the gateway communities<sup>2</sup>.

The economic boost of a National Park & Preserve could chart a new trajectory for middle Georgia, potentially triggering a considerable influx of tourism spending and investment. A study by the University of Tennessee’s Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics<sup>3</sup> estimated that unifying the current Ocmulgee National Monument with nearby public lands could lead to a six-fold increase in visitation by the year 2031, with total annual economic activity reaching \$233.4 million. (See Chart –p. 8.) At the same time, the expanded park could improve local quality of life by increasing public access to a range of

outdoor recreation opportunities including fishing, paddling, hiking, bicycling and camping.

The study was commissioned by National Parks Conservation Association and was funded in part by a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. It assessed current public lands, as well as an existing water trail and walking/biking trail, to explore what they could contribute to what would be the first National Park & Preserve east of the Mississippi.

The study objectives were to examine 1) how visitation might change if an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve were established, 2) the types of businesses that might be added to the region, 3) predicted impacts to the region’s economy, and 4) other potential benefits from having a National Park & Preserve. The study examined an extended 16 county region, comprised of the core counties of Bibb, Twiggs, Houston, Bleckley and Pulaski, plus eleven additional surrounding counties. (See Map–p. 9.)

To create a baseline, researchers established a sample of 10 “peer parks” selected due to similarities with the proposed Ocmulgee

## Annual Economic Benefits

Expected annual economic impacts from an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve 15 years after establishment (2016–2031):

	Ocmulgee National Monument 2015 (Actual)	Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve Most Likely Growth Scenario (Year 15 Projection: 2031)
<b>Visitors</b>	155,387	1,374,653
<b>Visitor Spending</b>	\$8.8 million	\$187.2 million
<b>Jobs</b>	151	3,171
<b>Tax Revenue</b>	Not Reported	\$33.5 million
<b>Labor Income</b>	\$3.4 million	\$86.7 million
<b>Total Economic Activity</b>	\$10.8 million	\$233.4 million

National Park & Preserve; such as size, the nature of the resources, available recreation activities, and distance from urban centers. (See list below.) Researchers then analyzed growth in visitation at these “peer parks,” which are mostly in the eastern U.S., and applied similar growth rates to the proposed Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. Researchers next examined current levels of spending at local businesses, such as restaurants, hotels, outfitters, etc. that serve visitors to the Ocmulgee National Monument and surrounding public lands. These spending levels were compared with counties surrounding the peer parks and the IMPLAN economic model was used to evaluate potential growth rates in similar businesses following the creation of an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. IMPLAN was originally developed by the USDA Forest Service and is widely used by universities and government agencies for economic impact modeling.

Three primary sources of economic impact from an Ocmulgee Park & Preserve were examined: visitor spending, spending on park operations, and investment in construction projects associated with creating the park (focused primarily on planned and proposed improvements to walking, biking, and paddling trails). Estimates were based on a 15-year projection window,

ending in 2031, and assumed a hypothetical National Park & Preserve opening in 2016. The study calculated direct economic impacts from spending and jobs. It also considered indirect and “multiplier effects” as tourism and outdoor recreation dollars circulate through the economy, such as when visitors purchase meals at restaurants, and restaurants then restock their inventories by purchasing from wholesalers.

Researchers evaluated four scenarios for visitation and economic impacts. The first assumes that no National Park & Preserve is created and that the existing public lands will continue to operate separately as they do now. The remaining three scenarios assume that a National Park & Preserve is indeed created. These scenarios are characterized by “high growth”, “low growth”, and “most likely” growth possibilities. In each case, the difference between each growth scenario and the “No Park & Preserve” scenario demonstrates the net impact from the park’s formation for each possible approach. (See Chart—p. 10.) Study findings are summarized in the next section and further detail can be found in the full study.



Left Page (Top): Great Blue Heron ©Sharman Ayoub (Bottom): Paddlers on the Ocmulgee River with a Cypress tree in the background ©Julian Buckmaster | Georgia Conservancy

## Ocmulgee’s Ten Peer Parks

The following parks were selected as “peer parks” based on size, the nature of their resources, available recreation activities, and distance from urban centers:

- Big Cypress National Preserve (FL)
- Big Thicket National Preserve (TX)
- Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (GA)
- Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park (MD, WV, DC)
- Congaree National Park (SC)
- Cuyahoga Valley National Park (OH)
- Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (NJ, PA)
- New River Gorge National River (WV)
- St. Croix National Scenic Riverway (WI)
- Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve (FL)



# An Opportunity for Growth—Visitation and Business

“Twiggs County residents are proud of the natural setting that is part of our county. A National Park & Preserve would protect that natural setting for future generations. The opportunity for service businesses would increase as more people visit...Already, there are several large hunting lodges near the river and elsewhere in Twiggs County. Additional hunting and fishing opportunities, campgrounds within the park and outside, stores to supply the tourists, and secondary businesses such as motels and restaurants could be a big boost to the Twiggs economy and bring jobs to our local citizens.”

**JUDY SHERLING**

Director, Development Authority of Jeffersonville and Twiggs County

The majority of the economic activity generated by an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve—about 90 percent—would come from visitor spending associated with key recreation and tourist activities. Researchers estimate that the following nine activities will have the greatest appeal and the strongest

potential for growth: heritage tourism, bicycling, paddling, camping, fishing, wildlife watching, hiking, hunting, and horseback riding.

In 2014 the combined public lands included in the study attracted nearly 150,000 people; of which, 122,800 were



## Comparing Growth Scenarios

Year 15 Projections (2016–2031)	Annual Visitation	Total Annual Economic Activity	Annual Jobs Supported
No National Park & Preserve	207,607	\$26.7 million	357
Low Growth	660,489	\$110.3 million	1,495
Medium Growth (Most Likely)	1,374,653	\$233.4 million	3,171
High Growth	1,692,005	\$287.3 million	3,904

Ocmulgee National Monument visitors. Then, in 2015, visitation to the Monument grew by 26% to 155,387. Visitation to the refuge and wildlife management areas is limited because many of these public lands currently have few or no full-time staff, engage in minimal marketing, and offer limited facilities. As a result, even many local residents have not visited these beautiful places in their own backyard. Often only a small interest group is aware of these lands at all and may find that public access is unpredictable.

For example, the lily-covered rock cliffs of Brown's Mount were closed to the public for many years, partly because there were no full-time rangers to protect the archaeological site or offer interpretive programs. The rich wildlife of Oaky Woods and Ocmulgee Wildlife Management Areas offer another example. They have been known to local hunters for years, but use and enjoyment by the non-hunting community is extremely limited. Additionally, portions of both areas once leased by the state have been lost to public use and are now threatened by development and land use change.

If all these resources were under a single National Park & Preserve umbrella, they would gain much greater name recognition, allowing them to be better advertised and marketed. If this marketing were strategically targeted at promoting the key recreation and tourist activities, then these activities could draw greater interest and attention from the local to international level. That, in turn, would translate into many additional visitors spending money in businesses such as restaurants, hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts, vacation rentals, campgrounds, sporting goods outfitters, retailers, and tours/outing services. These business sectors are among those most likely to expand or multiply within the local economy.



**Left Page (Left): Swainson's Warbler** ©Jerry Amerson  
**(Right): Red Fox** ©fanpop **(This Page, clockwise from Top Right): Paddling in a red canoe** ©Shutterstock  
 • **Hunter with dog** ©Georgia Wildlife Federation • **Birdwatchers, Ocmulgee National Monument** ©Paul Hoinowski • **Ocmulgee Heritage Trail bicyclers** ©Sharman Ayoub • **Young girl fishing** ©Georgia Wildlife Federation • **Walking the trails** ©Vladimir Ivanov | Dreamstime

## Finding a Niche and Blazing Some Trails

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**Based on use trends and the growth of trail systems around the country, the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail and the Ocmulgee River Water Trail have even greater potential than currently recognized to become more closely integrated into a National Park & Preserve and serve as primary drivers of recreation-based economic activity.**

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The University of Tennessee (UT) study notes that, based on the growth of trail systems around the country, the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail and Ocmulgee River Water Trail have even greater potential than currently recognized to be integral to a National Park & Preserve and serve as primary drivers of recreation-based economic activity. Lengthening the existing Ocmulgee Heritage Trail and enhancing the Ocmulgee River Water Trail would provide a broader recreational experience for visitors. Trail users will be more likely to stay overnight to enjoy a trail that is long enough for a half- or full-day's bicycle ride or at least a full day of paddling. Long land and water trails close together could be used to promote special events, like a biathlon or triathlon combining running, bicycling, and/or paddling elements.

In order to create the best possible visitor experience, a Middle Georgia Regional Commission report<sup>4</sup> called for extending the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail by at least 11 more miles, to create a 22-mile long trail. The UT study also recommends improvements, such as parking and restrooms, to boat landing sites along the Ocmulgee River Water Trail, with at least one new boat landing being added. Three camping areas, with 12 campsites each, should also be incorporated into water trail investments.

The regional trail network could be even further developed and extended into a long-distance greenway system modeled on Northwest Georgia's Silver Comet Trail. (See sidebar –p. 14.) The payoff for this effort could be significant. However, before “going big”, a systematic strategy is needed for building up, linking, and marketing the existing recreational assets near at hand.





### THE OCMULGEE HERITAGE TRAIL

Today, the Ocmulgee Heritage trail is popular for walking, biking, running, nature observation and fishing. Hugging the Ocmulgee River in Macon, it connects historic Central City Park (which is the nexus of several major regional events like the Cherry Blossom Festival) to Riverside Cemetery. In between, it crosses the river several times on bridges that also carry car traffic. Five miles of the trail are already within the Ocmulgee National Monument and there is the potential for more, as the park expands. (See Maps—pp. 16 & 17.)

The local non-profit NewTown Macon that manages the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail plans to add a little more than three miles of extensions to the trail, to occur over the next several years, for an estimated cost of about \$3.1 million. Funding for these extensions comes from donations, state transportation grants, federal funds, and a grant from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, but more fund-raising is needed to cover the full expense.

Using trail planning costs developed by Cranston Engineering for the extensions currently underway, it would cost about \$11.3 million to add 11 additional miles to

the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail, as the Middle Georgia Regional Commission report recommends. A trail this long would offer bicyclists a good half-day ride. Developing more trail sections over time could increase the challenge and provide an even better cycling experience.

Linking the Ocmulgee mounds to Amerson River Park, as currently planned, is a natural fit. The 180-acre park, managed by Macon-Bibb County, offers a network of 3.5 miles of hiking and biking trails, as well as a playground and picnic areas. The park's bluffs provide vistas of the river oxbow that surrounds its mature forests, meadows and wetlands. Two boat landings allow an afternoon's easy float from one end of the park to the other.

In 2015, NewTown Macon completed \$5.5 million in improvements to the park, including adding a second boat ramp, paving more trails, increasing parking, and building beautiful stone entryways and overlook pavilions reminiscent of state and national parks built in the 1930s. NewTown officials say early visitation numbers indicate the park is likely to draw 100,000 visitors a year, just about a third less than the Ocmulgee National Monument's 2015 visitation.

“Businesses want to locate around amenities so their employees can enjoy a rich quality of life. People are seeking walkable and bikeable communities more every day. Enhancing these amenities makes it easier for our industrial recruiters to get people to give Macon a long look. In addition, if I were a student, being able to safely walk or bike from the Mercer campus through the College Hill Corridor and into a National Park & Preserve, would make me want to come to Macon to go to school. We’re trying to attract the best and the brightest, and this is one way to do it.”

### CHRIS SHERIDAN

**Chairman of Sheridan Construction**  
Chairman, Ocmulgee Heritage Trail Executive Committee



Left Page: Tents and Trees along the river ©Shutterstock This Page (Top Left): Grandparents and granddaughter hiking ©Countrymama | Dreamstime.com (Lower left): Rock bench, Ocmulgee Heritage Trail ©Sharman Ayoub (Middle): Family strolling, Ocmulgee Heritage Trail ©Mary Anne Bates | Newtown Macon (Right): Dog and kayak, Ocmulgee River ©Julian Buckmaster | Georgia Conservancy



Amerson River Park is also the site of a historical Creek village and could complement both the outdoor and heritage tourism opportunities offered by an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. No detailed archaeological excavations have ever been conducted at the site, though a local archaeological group did collect surface artifacts for preservation in the last decade. NewTown Macon trail boosters have offered a long-term vision of building an interpretive center to share more of the

park's history and perhaps even house artifacts found at Amerson River Park.

These Ocmulgee Heritage Trail extensions are in the works, and Macon trail boosters are exploring others that could serve to increase pedestrian and recreational connections. For instance, there is an immediate effort to connect the existing trail to downtown Macon as part of the Macon Action Plan. The plan, spearheaded by the Macon-Bibb Urban Development Authority,

acts as a blueprint for development in the city's urban core. Among other things, it has endorsed the concept of creating an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. Heritage Trail representatives say they hope to see an "inland" trail extension eventually reach College Hill. If this happened in conjunction with the proposed expansion of Ocmulgee National Monument, it could allow Mercer University students to walk or bike on paved trails straight from their dorms to a national park.

## Silver Comet Trail as a Model for Middle Georgia

One of the most successful regional trails in the country, the Silver Comet Trail in northwest Georgia was built as the result of a decade-long community effort. Completed in 2008 at 61.5 miles, the Silver Comet is now the longest paved trail in the country. It connects with the Chief Ladiga Trail to add 33 more miles in Alabama and provide a continuous, easy biking experience nearly 100 miles long from Smyrna, GA to Anniston, AL. The Silver Comet is now attracting nearly 2 million users a year and generating \$47 million in annual local economic activity. Property values within a quarter mile of the Silver Comet have increased between 4 and 7 percent, with corresponding benefits to city and school coffers<sup>9</sup>.

An extended middle Georgia regional

trail of this kind could take several forms with the potential to either complement, or combine with, an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. Community leaders could choose to re-energize the decade-old grassroots effort to establish a recreational corridor between Macon and Milledgeville, linking the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail with Milledgeville's Oconee River Greenway Park and Riverwalk. The Central Georgia Rail-to-Trail Association has promoted the concept of converting an abandoned rail line between the two cities into a 33-mile walking and biking trail. (See *Georgia Locator Map*—p. 16.) Though likely to be outside (but adjacent to) an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve footprint, such a recreational connector could be a boon to the two college towns while increasing overall visitation.

Additionally, the conversion of a pre-existing rail line would also have some cost benefits over trying to forge a route through terrain that has not been previously cleared and graded.

Another idea suggested by park advocates in Macon would be to create a Macon-to-Hawkinsville trail by extending the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail south to eventually meet the Hawkinsville Riverfront Park and Riverwalk Trail. This trail could lie partially or completely within the footprint of an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve, connecting and traversing the existing public lands along the river corridor. Furthermore, a Macon-to-Hawkinsville route might be marketed as "General Blackshear's Trail," building on the theme of the

**BENEFITS OFFERED BY OCMULGEE HERITAGE TRAIL EXPANSION**

Walking and biking trails like the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail offer many types of community benefits:

**Economic**—A multi-use trail like the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail can create jobs—starting with the initial engineering and construction, and continuing through trail maintenance and trail-based recreation and tourism. Plus, a growing body of evidence indicates that beautiful natural surroundings and outdoor recreation amenities attract businesses that want to locate in towns that offer lifestyle advantages to their employees<sup>5</sup>. Nationally, bicycling recreation contributes about \$198 billion to the U.S. economy<sup>6</sup>. A North Carolina trail study found economic activity could total \$1 million per trail mile when multiplier effects are included. Additionally, property close to trails, parks, or green-space was found to increase in value by 4 to 7 percent<sup>7</sup>.

**Health**—Exercising on walking and biking trails leads to better health. This has obvious lifetime benefits on its own, but also contributes to greater worker productivity

and reduced health care expenses for both businesses and individual consumers. One study found that every dollar spent on trails led to \$2.94 in direct medical benefits per person annually<sup>8</sup>.

**Transportation alternatives and environmental benefits**—Multi-use trails create greenspace and wildlife habitat, which can contribute to safeguarding a region’s air and water quality. Greenways can also benefit the environment by serving as transportation avenues for commuters walking or biking to work, reducing congestion and air pollution from vehicles. Though Macon and surrounding communities have made substantial improvements in recent years, they must continue to guard against unsafe levels of ozone and fine particle pollution, since more rigorous federal standards were created in 2015. Falling into “non-attainment” could hamper the region’s ability to attract new businesses and, perhaps more ominously, limit mission possibilities for Robins Air Force Base. Promoting urban green space and pedestrian-friendly communities is one fairly low-cost strategy for improving the urban environment.



.....

**A multi-use trail like the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail can create jobs—starting with the initial engineering and construction, and continuing through trail maintenance and trail-based recreation and tourism. Plus, a growing body of evidence indicates that beautiful natural surroundings and outdoor recreation amenities attract businesses that want to locate in towns that offer lifestyle advantages to their employees<sup>5</sup>.**

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Left Page (Top Left): Family bicycling, Amerson River Park-Ocmulgee Heritage Trail ©Sharman Ayoub (Top Right): Runner, Amerson River Park ©Sharman Ayoub This Page (Bottom): Wooden path across marsh, Silver Comet Trail ©Jack Schiffer | Shutterstock (Top Right): Stone Pavilion, Amerson River Park ©Sharman Ayoub

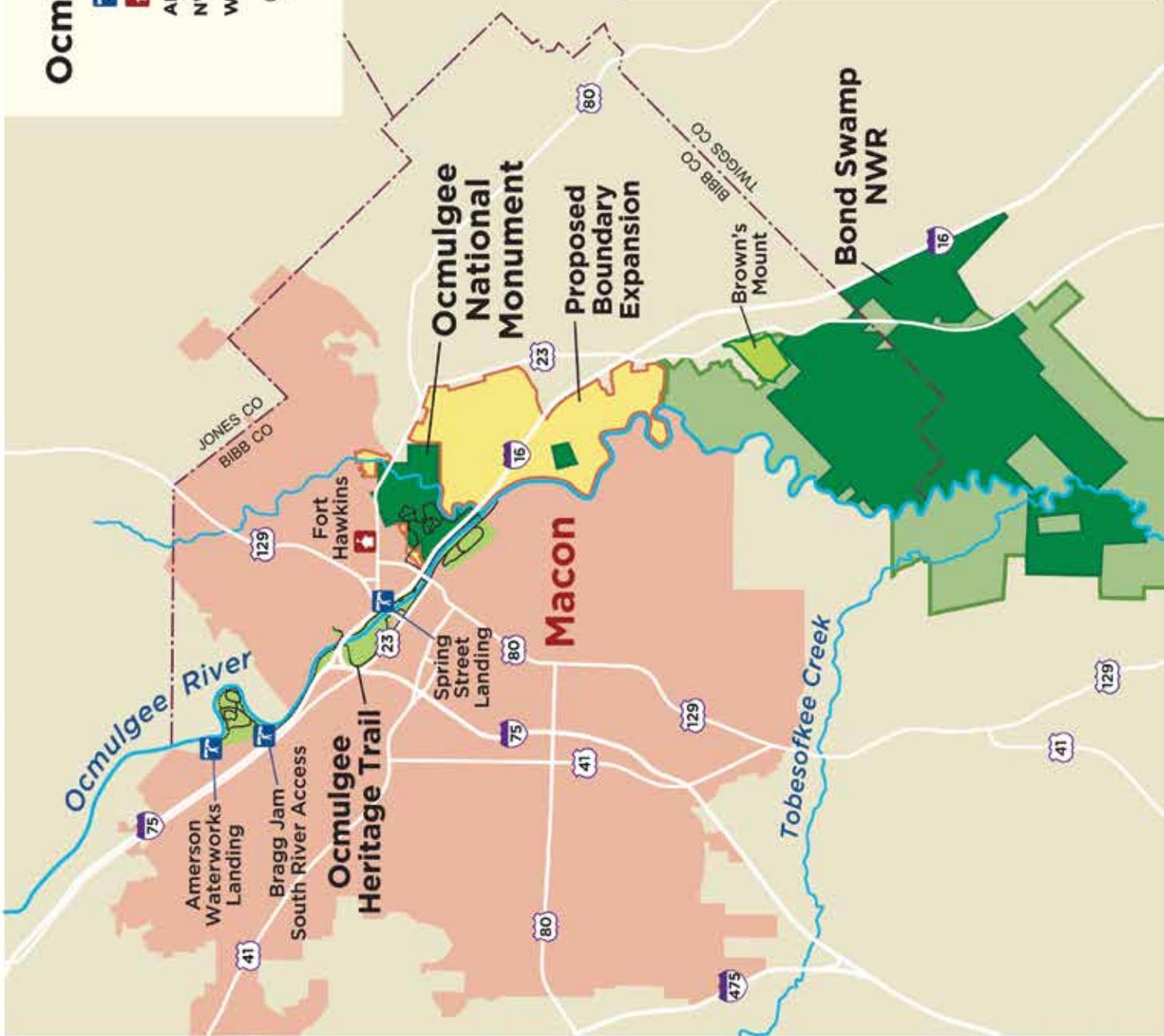


historic frontier sites that formed General Blackshear’s Line along the Ocmulgee River. (See *Georgia Locator and Inset Maps*—p. 16 and see additional discussion on p. 24/25.) Because of its length, this possibility faces some additional challenges requiring a longer time horizon.

If either, or both, the Macon-to-Milledgeville or Macon-to-Hawkinsville trail ideas were pursued, the resulting trail system could rival or surpass the Silver Comet in regional visitation and economic impacts. The National Park Service’s Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) could provide planning assistance in the same way that it has done for the Ocmulgee River Water Trail. The key is to begin forging a long-term regional recreation vision and to start systematically working toward it.

# Ocmulgee River Corridor

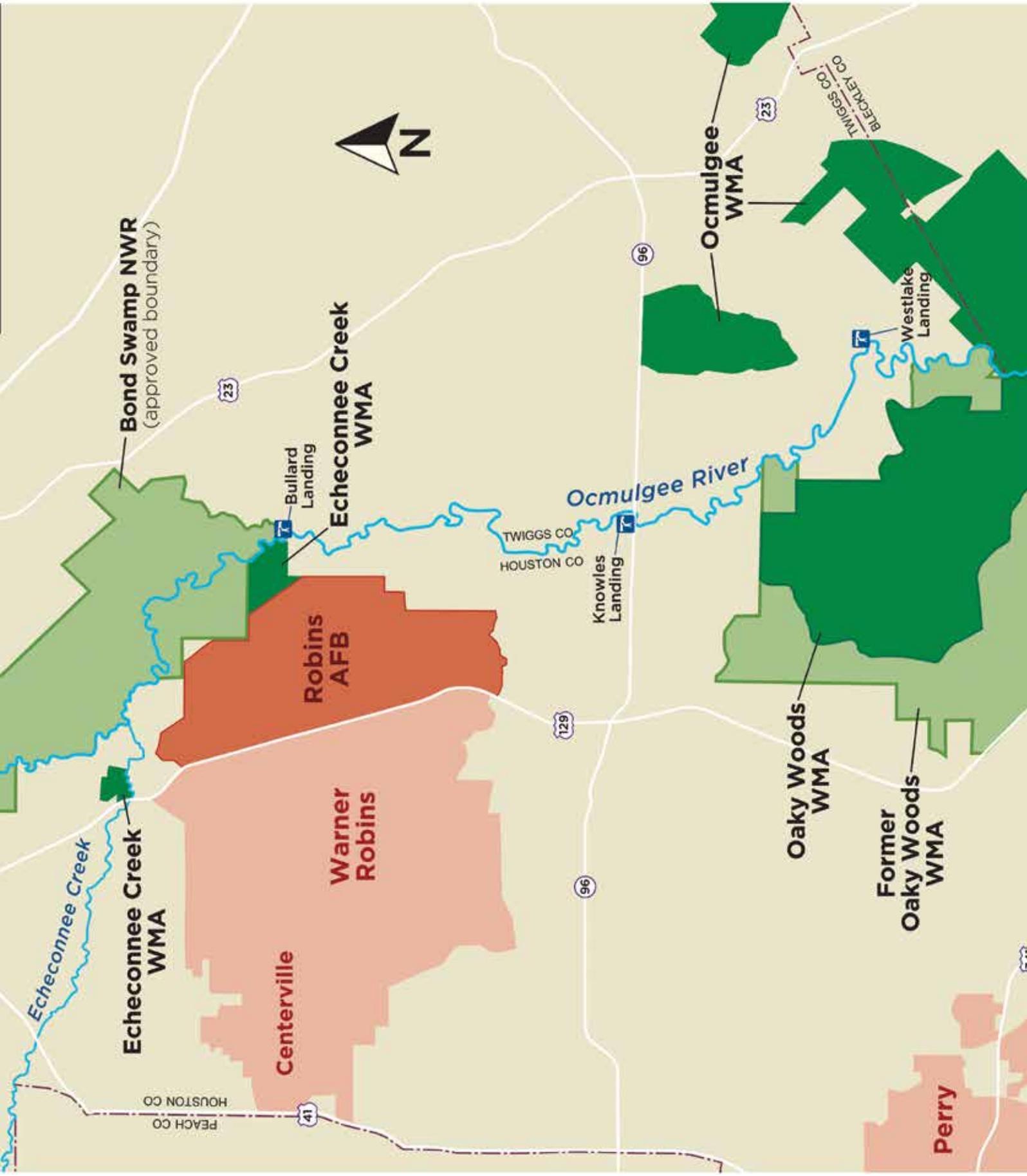
-  Ocmulgee Water Trail Access
  -  Frontier Fort Site
  - AFB** Air Force Base
  - NWR** National Wildlife Refuge
  - WMA** State Wildlife Management Area
- 0 1 2 3 4  
Scale in Miles

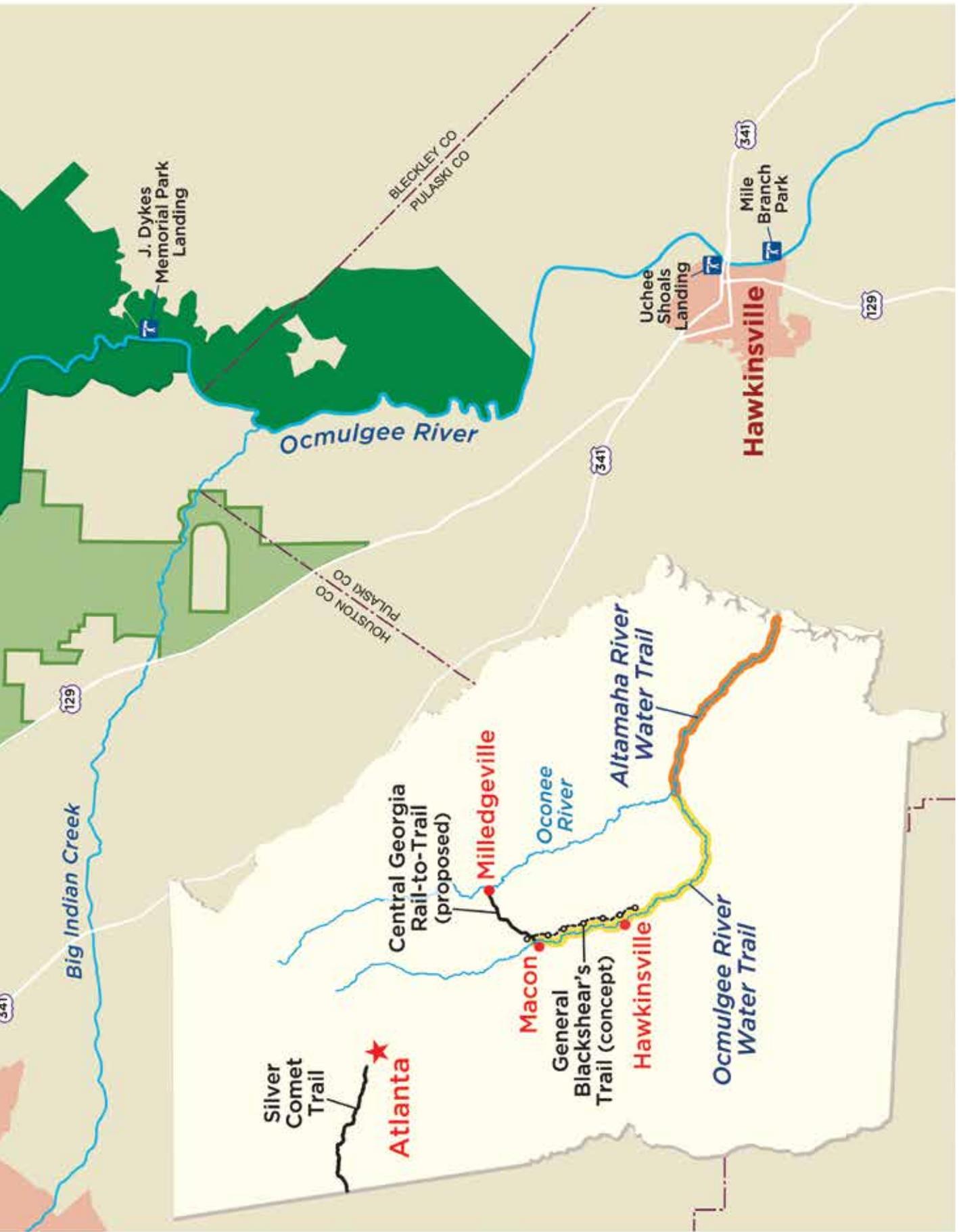


## Fortification of the Ocmulgee River in the Early 1800s\*



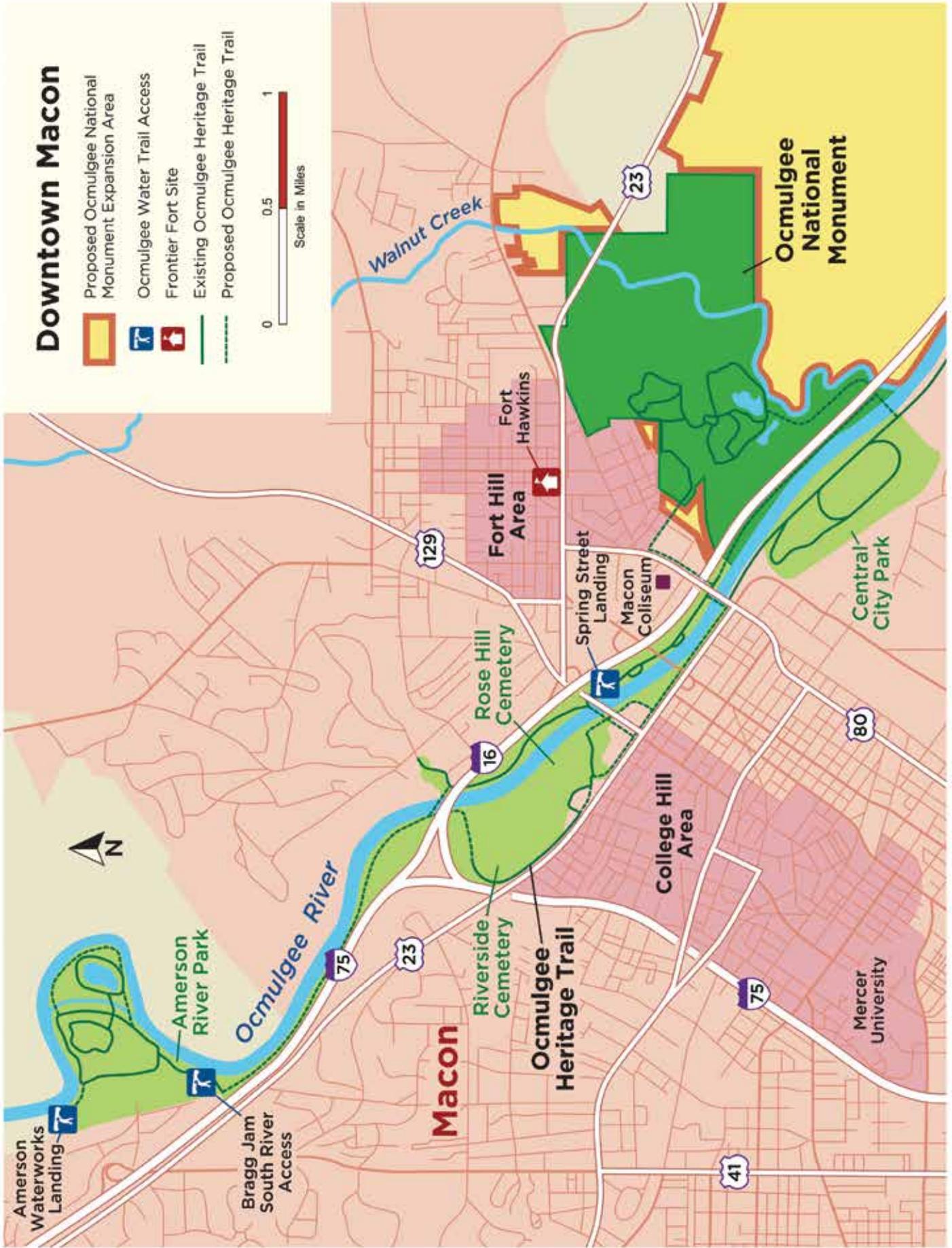
\* Except for Fort Hawkins, exact fort locations are undetermined.

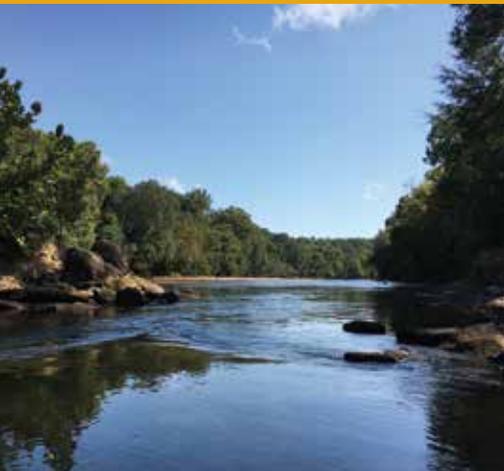




# Downtown Macon

-  Proposed Ocmulgee National Monument Expansion Area
-  Ocmulgee Water Trail Access
-  Frontier Fort Site
-  Existing Ocmulgee Heritage Trail
-  Proposed Ocmulgee Heritage Trail





“Establishing the Ocmulgee River Water Trail has significantly increased local interest in river recreation. For many people, it brought the Ocmulgee into view for the first time. A true indicator is seeing private cars and pickup trucks in downtown Macon with kayaks on their roofs or in the back. You didn’t see that before. Once you have a National Park & Preserve people are going to be asking, ‘OK, how can I explore it?’ It will give visitors more confidence to take longer trips and business owners more confidence in supporting them.”

### KATHLEEN O’NEAL

Small Business Owner and Outfitter  
Ocmulgee Outdoor Expeditions, LLC

## THE OCMULGEE RIVER WATER TRAIL

The growing popularity of paddling on Georgia waterways reflects a national trend. In 2012, 6 percent of Americans —more than 19 million people—participated in some form of paddling. The same year, an estimated 10.3 million Americans were kayakers who spent an average of eight days a year on the water<sup>10</sup>.

The Ocmulgee River Water Trail currently consists of nearly 200 miles of river between Macon and the Ocmulgee’s downstream confluence with the Altamaha River near Lumber City in Telfair County. (See Map—p. 16.) The northern Macon-to-Hawkinsville portion of this river trail would traverse and connect the public lands proposed for inclusion in an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. With the recent addition of the “Bragg Jam” landing at Amerson River Park, there are now 9 boat access points on the 71.5 river miles of the water trail between Macon and Hawkinsville.

The water trail began with four counties and the City of Hawkinsville in 2010, but quickly expanded to an 11-county partnership. While it is further developed than any region-wide land-based trail, infrastructure improvements are still needed to make it as attractive as possible as a paddling destination.

One challenge is the irregular spacing of public landing sites. Because paddling 16 miles takes about eight hours, landings spaced farther apart might deter paddlers, especially novices or families with young children. There is a long upstream stretch of the Ocmulgee River Water Trail with no easily accessed place to take out a boat. A new landing between the Spring Street and Bullard Landings would close this gap. One possible site for locating a public boat ramp is on land that is currently part of Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge (potentially part of a future Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve).

River trail access could be enhanced by paving six existing parking areas at boat landings (or seven, if a new landing were to be built at Bond Swamp). Restrooms are another important amenity. Only one current boat landing location has permanent restrooms; two more have portable toilets.

Assuming paddlers need a restroom every four hours, it would be best to place restrooms every eight miles or so. The addition of at least five more restroom locations would greatly benefit trail users.

Once some of these basic needs are met, paddlers could be provided with more opportunities for camping. Camping sites spaced no more than every 16 miles along the river would encourage overnight stays. Currently three landing sites allow camping. The addition of at least three more would increase the likelihood of multi-day trips.

Developing linkages between water trail landing sites and other nearby recreational options would expand opportunities for exploration. For instance, James Dykes Landing is inside the state’s Ocmulgee Wildlife Management Area. Knowles Landing is next to 170 acres of green space maintained by Houston County. And Bond Swamp, where a boat landing could be added, could provide access to more than four miles of hiking trails, additional parking, and the nearby Brown’s Mount archaeological site. If paddlers could boat, camp, and enjoy easy access to nature trails, bird watching, and other activities, it would add to their sense of adventure and willingness to extend their stays.

In a similar way to walking and biking trails, water trails provide assets and benefits as recognized in the Middle Georgia Regional Commission study<sup>11</sup>, including: health and



This Page (Left): Ocmulgee River near Amerson River Park in Macon, GA ©Tracy Kramer (Right): Juvenile White Ibis ©Sharman Ayoub Right Page (Top): Paddling the Ocmulgee River with the Georgia Conservancy ©Andre Turner (Bottom): Tent on riverbank ©varuna | Shutterstock



wellness, resource conservation (land, water, air quality), recreation and tourism, enhanced property values, and economic growth.

According to the University of Tennessee study, adding the suggested boat landing, parking, camping and restroom facilities

to the Ocmulgee River Water Trail would substantially improve the overall trail experience at a cost of about \$379,000, not including any new land purchases or rental costs. However, if these improvements were made all at once, then the resulting initial year estimate for economic activity

would be \$570,372, more than offsetting the investment cost.

In summary, several strategies can be envisioned to greatly enhance the draw of an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. A near-term goal might be to make extensions and improvements to the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail and the Ocmulgee River Water Trail in tandem. A second, mid-range objective might be the revitalization of the Central Georgia Rail-to-Trail effort to link the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail to Milledgeville. Finally, a longer-range goal would be to connect the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail south to Hawkinsville, approximating a route between the old frontier forts of General Blackshear's Line.

One pathway to a regional recreation vision may be a mechanism in Georgia state law that allows for the creation of a recreation authority to serve multiple cities and counties<sup>12</sup>. This could be used to unite the counties surrounding an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve to facilitate planning and implementation of an inter-linked regional land and water trail system.



# Developing the Niche- Cultivating the Economic Value of Other Complementary Assets

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**Heritage tourism in Georgia generates spending of \$6.15 billion annually,<sup>13</sup> offering economic and educational benefits, while preserving regional crafts and traditions, and building regional pride.**

.....

The Macon/Middle Georgia area possesses several additional, often-underappreciated features that could add up to a suite of unmatched educational, recreational, and heritage tourism attractions coalescing around an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. With the park as a centerpiece, these assets could combine to attract diverse local, regional and international audiences.

Macon is already a popular destination for “heritage tourism” and the region has also demonstrated its ability to develop local festivals and celebrations with national and international appeal, such as Macon’s Cherry Blossom Festival and the Ocmulgee

Indian Celebration. Local businesses have created many of the amenities and services needed to meet the needs of the visitors they attract.

A 2010 Georgia Department of Natural Resources study indicated that heritage tourism in Georgia generates spending of \$6.15 billion annually,<sup>13</sup> offering economic and educational benefits while preserving regional crafts and traditions, and building regional pride. Multiple themes that are unique local strengths could enlarge the heritage tourism potential associated with an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. Several of these themes are discussed here.

## East Macon’s Fort Hill Neighborhood

The Ocmulgee National Monument is a green oasis surrounded on two sides by the historically African American community of Fort Hill in East Macon. (See Map—p. 17.) This neighborhood maintains a strong sense of identity despite struggles with poverty and the need for urban revitalization and economic opportunity. The creation of an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve could have a meaningful impact close to home, creating new opportunities for neighborhood businesses to serve a growing stream of visitors.

The neighborhood’s Davis Homes public housing project is divided from the park by a chain link fence. The neighborhood is home to the Macon Housing Authority Family Investment Center, which offers services such as day care, after-school tutoring and recreation programs. A National Park & Preserve could expand outreach and educational programs to bring the neighborhood children into the



park, or to bring the park to them.

A National Park & Preserve could also capitalize on the National Park Service’s “Urban Agenda 2016”<sup>14</sup> which calls for a new emphasis on urban national parks that build “relevancy for all Americans, to connect with their lives where they live, rather than only where some may spend their vacation.” This emphasis comes partly from the realization that national parks need to do more to

attract the young and people of color, as the American population continues to become more urban and diverse.

The Urban Agenda states: “Urban national parks are particularly well-positioned as places where young people, many from diverse and often underserved communities, can experience close-to-home outdoor recreation and nature; arts, culture and history; and perhaps most importantly, gain some sense of confidence and encouragement about their own future.”

A specific request by Macon-Bibb County to become one of the National Park Service’s focal Urban Agenda cities could be very timely and beneficial. The Urban Agenda may provide an ideal vehicle for bringing additional attention and resources to bear on Macon’s urban renewal efforts. At the very least, a broader conversation on the topic is worth exploring.

Above: Visitors with a Great Horned Owl, Ocmulgee National Monument Bird Show ©Sharman Ayoub

**NATIVE AMERICAN  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND  
CULTURAL LANDSCAPE**

The Ocmulgee National Monument forms the heart of an ancient Native American cultural landscape extending from Macon in both directions along the Ocmulgee River. Beyond the site of the great mounds, Creek villages were located up and down the river during historical times.

The National Monument visitor center and museum displays and houses more than 2,000 artifacts dating back to when the first humans in the Southeast encountered the last of the great Ice Age mammals. However, only a tiny fraction of the many thousands of artifacts recovered in the 1930s-era archaeological excavations are actually housed at the park. Most are in Tallahassee, Florida at the National Park Service’s Southeast Archeological Center. The Center archives over nine million artifacts and historical documents from



Georgia and throughout the Southeast.

Could more of this vast body of archaeological and historical material be brought back to Macon and made publicly accessible? Perhaps the Ocmulgee National Monument visitor center museum could be significantly expanded. Alternatively, a ‘Museum of the Southeastern Indian’, modeled after the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of the American Indian, might be established in Macon. Such a major cultural institution, if developed to complement an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve, could bring to light a much larger portion of the National Park Service collections and provide a fuller telling of middle Georgia’s rich Native American past.

**Above:** Ocmulgee National Monument Visitor Center ©Maryann Bates Photography | NewTown Macon **Left:** Native reenactor, Ocmulgee Indian Celebration ©Sharman Ayoub **(Top):** Traditional pottery on Earth Lodge floor Sharman Ayoub **Photo Below (Bottom Right):** Indian Warrior reenactor, Ocmulgee Indian Celebration ©Sharman Ayoub



“This is such a monumental opportunity for the Ocmulgee Old Fields to be made into a (National Park & Preserve)... It is so important that we look at connectivity... As a state I think it's very responsible of us to look at these sensitive areas and to say: 'How can we make sure they're going to remain ecologically intact?' There are a large percentage of private landowners in the state of Georgia that are interested in doing the right thing by the land. I think this could help set an example of how a community of private, governmental and local interests can come together and protect a sensitive (place) and to say: 'This is not only good for the land itself, but it's good for the economy'”.

**CHUCK LEAVELL**

Twiggs County Forest Landowner,  
Keyboardist for the Rolling Stones

**CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE**

In the last several decades there has been a resurgence of interest by Native American tribes in restoring the spiritual and cultural connection with the Ocmulgee National Monument and to their historic homeland in Georgia. In the 1990s, the Muscogee Creek Nation took a leadership role in successfully pushing the federal government to recognize the Ocmulgee Old Fields as a Traditional Cultural Property (TCP), significant to multiple tribal governments and organizations and eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Traditional cultural properties have special value due to their direct, continuing association with a living community's most deeply-rooted cultural beliefs, heritage, and customs.

The Ocmulgee Old Fields TCP—the only Traditional Cultural Property east of the Mississippi River—encompasses the Ocmulgee National Monument, Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge and more. This status does not convey any tribal ownership rights, but instead gives the Muscogee Creek Nation, and certain other

tribes with historical ties to the Southeast, special consideration and consultation rights in decisions relating to federally-funded projects that could threaten the area's cultural values.

The Muscogee Creek people are descended from the historic Creek Confederacy, which was one of the Southeast's historical Five Civilized Tribes. In the 1830s, during the Indian Removal era, the Muscogee were forcibly relocated to Oklahoma by the United States government. Today the Muscogee Creek Nation is the largest federally recognized Muscogee tribal group in the country, overseeing an 11-county area, with its seat of government in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. The Nation also maintains a tribal college, a historic and cultural preservation office, and a tribal tourism department. All are potential partners in building understanding of present-day Muscogee society and developing dynamic, culturally rich initiatives around an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve.

Ocmulgee National Monument's Ocmulgee Indian Celebration marked its 25th anniversary in 2016 and affords one of the most visible points of interaction between





Macon and the Native American community. The September festival commemorates the culture of the Muscogee, Seminole, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw and other Native peoples. It has become a major event in the region, drawing over 20,000 visitors annually, who come to experience dancing, storytelling, food, crafts, and demonstrations over its three-day run. Native Americans from up to 25 different tribes travel from around the country to participate.

This broad Native American cultural connection is a remarkable feature and offers the chance for Macon and key local institutions to forge closer ties, particularly with the Muscogee Creek Nation, to develop new, mutually beneficial initiatives. For instance, a 'Center for the Study of Muscogee Creek Culture' could be established for the purpose of developing Muscogee scholars and scholarship. The exact mission of such a Center should be defined largely by the

Muscogee Creek themselves, but it could offer a vehicle for local collaboration while highlighting the lives, achievements, and aspirations of contemporary Muscogee people and serving as a hub for cultural exchange.

The Center could host special cultural events, rotating exhibits, and educational programs in Native American music and the arts. It might foster partnerships between students and faculty at the College of the Muscogee Nation and local Macon institutions like Mercer and Middle Georgia State universities, as well as connect to National Park Service initiatives, such as the "Teacher-Ranger-Teacher" educational enrichment and "Pro-Ranger" law enforcement recruiting programs. Ultimately, the Center could rekindle old connections and forge new ones between the seat of modern tribal life in Oklahoma and the historic Muscogee Creek homeland in middle Georgia.

Ocmulgee Indian Celebration pictures ©Sharman Ayoub Above: Mvskoke Nation Honor Guard From Left to Right: Male Fancy Dancer • Two young ladies in traditional dress • Wood-firing of traditional pottery • Toddler in traditional costume with a baby • Festival guest being painted by Native reenactor





(Above): Frontier era reenactor, Ocmulgee National Monument ©Sharman Ayoub

“Mercer University’s Quality Enhancement Plan, entitled ‘Research that Reaches Out’, emphasizes the integration of service learning and research opportunities for its students. The University doesn’t currently have an environmental field station, so several of our academic departments rely on nearby public lands like Brown’s Mount and Bond Swamp. Mercer also has an interest in reaching out to the College of the Muscogee Nation to explore joint academic initiatives. A National Park and Preserve would be an ideal mechanism for bringing these themes together. Members of the faculty that I’ve spoken with think there’s a lot of potential there.”

### BILL SOLOMON

Mercer University, Senior Vice President and General Counsel

## AMERICA’S MILITARY HISTORY

In addition to the Native American cultural significance of the area, the river corridor contains a significant concentration of military heritage sites, possibly unmatched by anything else in the national park system. An Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve could touch on key episodes in military history including:

- Hernando de Soto’s Southeastern expedition and its role in the Spanish conquest of the Americas (1539-1542);
- Queen Anne’s War between Britain and Spain (1702-1706);
- The Yamasee War between the British and various tribes, including the Muscogee Creek (1715-1717);
- The establishment of Fort Hawkins as an American military and trading outpost (1806);
- The fortification of the Ocmulgee River during the wars of the southeastern frontier (1811-1819);
- The Civil War battles of Dunlap Hill and Walnut Creek (1864); and
- The history of Camp Wheeler, an infantry training camp for the U.S. Army during World Wars I and II, as well as a POW camp during World War II.

The timeline could be further extended if the Museum of Aviation at Robins Air Force Base were engaged as a partner to develop interpretive programs chronicling middle Georgia’s role in the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

## TELLING THE STORIES OF THE SOUTHEASTERN FRONTIER

One especially important period in the nation’s history that is not well-represented within the national park system is the post-Colonial frontier era in the Southeast. During the time between the American Revolution and the period of Indian Removal and the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, the Ocmulgee River corridor was a crossroads of key individuals and events in our nation’s early history. In fact, for a brief period in the early 19th century, the river *was* the American frontier.

Several Creek tribal towns were located along the river, as was Fort Hawkins (1806–1824). During the period of Tecumseh’s Rebellion (1811–1813), the War of 1812 (1811–1815), the Creek Civil War (1813–1814), and the first Seminole War (1814–1819), ten additional forts were erected along the river south of Fort Hawkins. Known as General Blackshear’s Line, these forts were intended to reinforce and garrison the frontier, plus serve as staging areas for American troops battling British and Native American forces to the west and south. The exact locations of these town and fort sites are still being determined by historians and archaeologists, but some are thought to have been on lands that could be included in an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. (See *Inset Map*—p. 16.)

This important period of our nation’s history deserves to be better preserved and interpreted for all Americans. The National Park Service would likely be the agency best



equipped for this task. A National Park & Preserve would serve as a lens focusing on the region’s history, heritage, and resources, thus also creating a branding opportunity that could be leveraged to promote middle Georgia’s regional identity. For example, as previously mentioned, a Macon to Hawkinsville walking and biking trail might be tied into the theme of the frontier forts via the title “General Blackshear’s Trail.”

Finally, the Fort Hawkins site, adjacent to the Ocmulgee National Monument, offers great potential for expansion and development of living history programming. The City of Macon’s Fort Hawkins Commission has focused on reconstructing more of the fort and providing tours and reenactments. Recent archaeological digs have revealed more about the shape of the fort and daily life during frontier days, attracting visitors to watch archaeologists at work. The Fort also has a master plan that envisions future site expansion and increased educational and interpretive programming.

Urban revitalization efforts in Macon could build on the Fort Hawkins site to create an ambitious living history area closely linked with an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve and modeled after such world-renowned sites as Colonial Williamsburg, Historic Jamestowne (part of Colonial National Historical Park), Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, or Plymouth Plantation. An additional concept might be to develop a series of historical outdoor dramas to tell the stories of the Muscogee people and the Georgia frontier. Such an endeavor could emulate other well-known theater productions like “Unto These Hills” (the Cherokee story in the Great Smoky Mountains), “Tecumseh” (the tale of the Shawnee leader), or “Trumpet in the Land” (the Ohio wilderness settlements during the Revolutionary War)<sup>15</sup>. Such an initiative might offer still another opportunity for Fort Hawkins to partner with the Mercer University Theater Department, the College of the Muscogee Nation, or a Center for the Study of Muscogee Creek Culture in creating an annual “Shakespeare in the Park”-type series of theatrical events.



**Left Page (Bottom):** Fort Hawkins in Macon, GA ©Lindsay Holliday **This Page:** Frontier era ‘living history’ reenactments attract many visitors to Cumberland Gap National Historical Park in Middlesboro, KY (2 & 5) and Wilderness Road State Park in Ewing, VA (1, 3 & 4) ©Harold Jerrell | Friends of Cumberland Gap

**WILDLIFE ABUNDANCE,  
OUTDOOR ADVENTURE, AND  
THE PERMANENT PROTECTION  
OF PUBLIC HUNTING LANDS**

Beyond culture and history, the Ocmulgee River corridor is one of Georgia's biological crown jewels. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources recognizes the corridor's wildlife diversity and abundance and has made its conservation a state priority. This wealth of natural resources is one of the magnets attracting outdoor recreationists to the Ocmulgee River Water Trail, the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail and other parts of the corridor.

Fortunately, local residents and their leaders have come to more fully appreciate the natural richness and beauty of the Ocmulgee River, which was largely ignored and hidden by highways and railroad tracks until recent years. Local communities are now expanding their efforts to promote the river's visibility and public access.

The establishment of an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve would provide a vehicle for leveraging the river corridor's natural assets to create an explorers' playground and the starting point for a truly world-class, 'bucket list'-worthy adventure. For example, when completed, the Ocmulgee River Water Trail will link with the Altamaha River Water Trail to provide a continuous paddling experience of over 300 miles, connecting Ocmulgee National Monument with Fort Frederica National Monument on St. Simon's Island at the Atlantic coast and passing through some of the most incredible wild areas left in the Southeast.

Such a resource could be a significant attraction for adventure-focused groups, including scouting organizations. The Central Georgia Council of the Boy Scouts of America, based in Macon, might help establish activities modeled after elements of other Boy Scout High Adventure programs, like the Northern Tier paddling camp in



“If you look back at the accomplishments of the Governor’s Land Conservation Council over the last eight years or so, you’ll see much of the efforts have been in the Ocmulgee River and Altamaha River corridors. That part up and down the Ocmulgee is one of the richest wildlife areas anywhere in the Southeastern United States. We have the only isolated black bear population in the state. Hunting, fishing, eco-tourism, and our quality of life--that’s where a lot of our economic opportunity lies.”

**JOHN BEMBRY**

Small Business Owner - Bembry Veterinary Clinic, Hawkinsville  
Forest landowner, Georgia Land Conservation Council Member



This Page (Far Left): Monarch butterfly ©Sharman Ayoub Above (Top Left): Wood Duck ©Dan Vickers (Top Right): Young deer at the Monument ©Sharman Ayoub (Bottom): Turtles and alligator sharing a log ©Sharman Ayoub



Minnesota and the Atchafalaya Swamp Base program in Louisiana.

River-based, educational paddle adventures for urban youth and school groups are also growing in popularity. The Ocmulgee Water Trail Partnership and other middle Georgia community organizations could explore partnering with local foundations to sponsor urban wilderness canoe adventures for local schools. These could be modeled after those developed by Minneapolis-based Wilderness Inquiry, which brings its Canoemobile and Urban Wilderness Canoe Adventure programs to communities around the country, providing experiential learning to school groups.

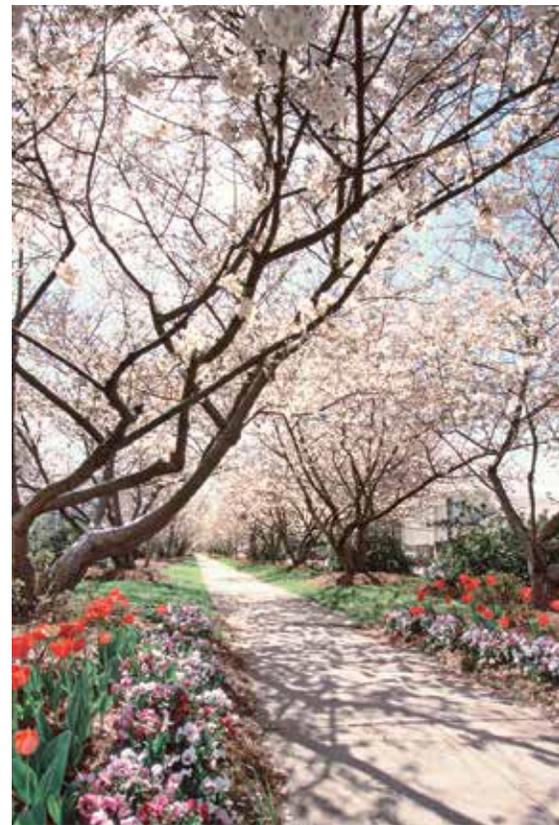
Finally, an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve could help reverse the trend of ongoing loss of public hunting areas in middle Georgia. In 2004, both chambers of the Georgia General Assembly passed resolutions (HR 1256 & SR 755) "...urging the Congress of the United States to consider creating a national preserve or other similar federal property to protect land and other natural resources and promote hunting and fishing in a continuous corridor of the Ocmulgee and Altamaha Rivers in central and south Georgia...". The conservation of these areas for public hunting would also add a layer of insurance and diminish future uncertainties regarding land use change surrounding Robins Air Force Base.

## FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS

Middle Georgia could further cultivate its distinctive heritage tourism brand by developing a series of new or re-purposed festivals thematically linked to an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. The region already has some well-known celebrations. In addition to the Ocmulgee Indian Celebration and Macon's International Cherry Blossom Festival, other popular events include the Bragg Jam Music Festival (Macon), the Harvest Festival & BBQ Cook Off (Hawkinsville), the former Mossy Creek Arts & Crafts Festival (Perry), and the Georgia Peach Festival (Byron).

Some new park- and river-focused themes that might be integrated into a regionally-coordinated festival calendar include the following: a middle Georgia Black Bear & Wildlife Festival, a Colonial & Frontier Days Festival, a Military History & Heritage Celebration, and an Ocmulgee Paddle-A-Thon & River Festival. The five counties likely to surround an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve could synchronize and align their efforts. Such multi-festival coordination could open the door to creative collaboration between local institutions and the National Park Service in the pursuit of grants, foundation partnerships, and community-building alliances, all amplifying the message that middle Georgia and an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve are top travel destinations.

**Top: Superintendent with Fancy Dancers, Ocmulgee Indian Celebration ©Sharman Ayoub Right: Cherry Blossoms ©International Cherry Blossom Festival, Macon, GA**



# The Path Forward: The Next Steps to Creating an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve



**Above: Endangered Wood Stork in flight**  
©Dan Vickers **Below: Ocmulgee River paddlers**  
©Julian Buckmaster | Georgia Conservancy

Combining the Ocmulgee National Monument with additional public lands along the river to create an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve has the potential to draw increasing numbers of visitors to a wealth of heritage tourism and outdoor recreation activities. That wealth can build more wealth.

A growing body of research demonstrates that gateway communities near protected public lands, such as national parks, can cultivate competitive economic advantages over similar communities without such features. Well-promoted and locally-valued

public lands can attract migrating retirees and Baby Boomers that, in turn, draw retirement and investment income to a community. Additionally, entrepreneurs and established businesses perceive that plentiful outdoor recreation opportunities, like those offered by gateway communities, will promote an active lifestyle and quality of life that attracts superior employees<sup>16,17</sup>. Ultimately, enthusiastic community-driven support and strategic marketing will be key to achieving the greatest possible economic benefits from a National Park & Preserve, but the initial vision must first become reality.



Legislation pending before Congress in 2017 would take the first step by expanding the boundary of the current Ocmulgee National Monument by 2,100 acres and changing its name to Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park. It would also authorize the National Park Service to conduct a study of the river corridor from Macon to Hawkinsville to determine its national significance and whether the park should be expanded further to consolidate existing public lands, protect hunting and fishing, and provide additional opportunities for education, recreation, and public enjoyment. The study would also ascertain if a National Park & Preserve or some similar designation is feasible, and whether the National Park Service would be the best agency to manage the lands. Once those determinations are made, recommendations would be sent to Congress on what should be done next.

This process will take time and park supporters cannot afford to be complacent. Residents, business leaders and community organizations need to reiterate to their local, state and federal elected officials their strong support for the long-term goal of creating an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve. The National Park Service study, once authorized, will bring additional opportunities for public comment and engagement. Concerned citizens should stay abreast of developments and take advantage of every chance to speak up and advocate for the largest feasible version of an Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve to provide the greatest impacts to middle Georgia's economy.

Multiple local organizations are actively working to conserve and improve the river and adjacent lands, among the most prominent of which are the Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve Initiative, the Ocmulgee Water Trail Partnership, the Ocmulgee Land Trust, the Historic Macon Foundation and

NewTown Macon. Additionally, the Ocmulgee National Monument Association has long provided resources in support of the educational and interpretive programs of the Ocmulgee National Monument. All of these organizations are deserving of broad public support.

Although creating a fully realized Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve could take a number of years, active and engaged communities can energize the process, hastening improvements to middle Georgia's economy, environment, and quality of life. Nationwide, those gateway communities that promote, treasure, and cultivate their national parks and public lands tend to reap the greatest benefits from them.

What will middle Georgia become over the next 50 to 75 years? Can a National Park & Preserve help anchor the region's future? The answers are largely up to the people of middle Georgia.



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Above: Prothonotary Warbler ©Dan Vickers  
Below: School group, Ocmulgee National Monument ©Sharman Ayoub Next Page: Hunter with children on a trail ©Georgia Wildlife Federation



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**This Page:** Walnut Creek wetlands, Ocmulgee  
National Monument ©Alan Cressler **Back Cover:**  
Boardwalk over wetlands, Ocmulgee National  
Monument ©Atlanta Trails | Atlantatrails.com





## DISCLAIMER

This study has certain limitations. The model of the area's economy represents a snapshot in time in which one picture of a potential future is developed. Projecting a future economy is a daunting task that cannot account for unpredictable events, e.g. a future economic downturn. In addition, estimated economic impacts depend on numbers of visitors, park characteristics, available activities and amenities, etc. Achieving an optimal growth scenario could depend on implementation of a coherent and interconnected Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve, with fully developed trail systems, camping, etc., plus enthusiastic marketing and promotion by the surrounding communities, as well as favorable economic conditions to sustain traveler income and travel.

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