

Private Paths to Public Parks in the American South

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Abstract

This paper explores the connections between private individuals, government entities, and non-governmental organizations in the creation of parklands throughout the American South. While current historiography primarily credits the federal government with the creation of parks and protection of natural wonders, an investigation of parklands in the Southern United States reveals a recurring connection between private initiative and park creation. Secondary literature occasionally reflects the importance of local and non-government sources for the preservation of land, yet these works still emphasize the importance of a national bureaucracy setting the tone for the parks movement. Some works, including Jacoby's *Crimes Against Nature* examine local actors, but focus on opposition to the imposition of new rules governing land incorporated into national parks. Other works chronicle local efforts to preserve land in the face of some outside threat. In spite of scholarly recognition of non-government agencies and local initiative, the importance of local individuals in the creation of parklands remains an understudied aspect of American environmental history. Several examples in the American South raise concerns about the traditional narrative pitting governmental hegemony against local resistance. This paper argues for widespread, sustained interest in both nature preservation and in creating spaces for public recreation at the local level, and finds that the "private path to public parks" merits further investigation.

In 1925 a small group of wealthy residents from Chattanooga, Tennessee founded a privately funded recreational park hugging the slopes of Lookout Mountain, one of the area's most prominent geological landmarks. The park was primarily the creation of renowned *New York Times* publisher Adolph Ochs, who described Lookout Mountain "in glowing terms," and "declared he had traveled the world over and never found anything to compare with Lookout Mountain."¹ Boosterism aside, Ochs referenced both the natural beauty, ideal location, and ease of development and he envisioned a park on the mountain that would serve the needs of all Chattanoogaans.

Over a period of ten years the park came to encompass 3,000 acres. Located on the slopes of Lookout Mountain, at its nearest point the park boundary was approximately six miles northeast of the federally managed Chickamauga battlefield and it sat entirely within the city limits of Chattanooga. Although created with private money, from its inception the founders intended for the park to serve "public welfare purposes," and sought to create "the greatest...park of the American continent."²

The city recognized the need for a place where local citizens might spend time relaxing, especially as "at present time the Park System available for the citizens of Chattanooga on hot nights is very limited."³ When Ochs identified Lookout Mountain as a suitable place for a park, he drew on experience with the region's nationally managed properties, including the parts of Lookout Mountain's slopes that already served as a component of the Chattanooga recreation landscape. The Point Park area on the northern promontory of Lookout Mountain had been a

¹ "Lookout Mountain Park Project is Now Assured," *The Chattanooga Times*, February 5, 1925.

² Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park Mailing, 1925, Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park Scrapbook. Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia; "To Perpetuate Scenic Beauty of Mountain," *Chattanooga Times*, February 3, 1925.

³ W.E. Boileau to Major W.J. Colburn, May 1, 1911, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

component of Chattanooga-Chickamauga National Military Park since the 1890s due to its significance to the Civil War battle. In the early twentieth century, this outpost of the military park served primarily as a recreation area for a city lacking in public park space.

While an important transportation hub and growing industrial center, in the 1910s Chattanooga was still a young city, hardly comparable to the mature urban behemoths of New York or Chicago. Despite this, the city's leading citizens envisioned a bright future for the city, and preparing for this bright future included actively planning for a Chattanooga that expanded to take its place among the greatest industrial cities of America.⁴ Such a city deserved fine architecture, beautiful landscaping, and public facilities to enhance the lives of its citizens.

Chattanooga's leading citizens also saw public facilities like parks as a key ingredient in the ideal progressive and modern city they desired. More than just providing a place for Chattanoogaans to stroll on the weekends, the primary architect for the Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park, Henry Herts, asserted, "we may either build jails and penitentiaries or we may build parks and playgrounds."⁵ Adolph Ochs explained that one of the primary motivations for building the park was so that "the little unfortunate people of the world who are sick in spirit and weary in body may find comfort and courage from the beauties of nature."⁶

If the park was to benefit the unfortunate, it fell to the fortunate to create the recreational space. It was primarily the wealthy citizenry that attended a downtown Chattanooga lunch meeting in early 1925 where Adolph Ochs proposed the park, with "a large portion of the 'wealth, political and social power of the city...represented.'"⁷ The public standing of the park's founder played a significant role in attracting attention. A self-made man by all accounts, Ochs

⁴ Lookout Mountain Business League Resolution, December 6, 1911, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

⁵ "Lookout Mountain Park Project is Now Assured," *The Chattanooga Times*, February 5, 1925.

⁶ "To Perpetuate Scenic Beauty of Mountain," *Chattanooga Times*, February 3, 1925.

⁷ "Lookout Mountain Park Project is Now Assured," *The Chattanooga Times*, February 5, 1925.

gained control of the *Chattanooga Times* in 1878 at the young age of 20 using borrowed money.⁸ After building his hometown newspaper into a successful business, Ochs looked further afield and purchased the *New York Times*, then a struggling newspaper that was of only regional interest. By the 1920s Ochs had built the *New York Times* into an internationally recognized powerhouse. Described in later writings as “the leading spirit in all civic movements at Chattanooga,” Ochs continued to involve himself in Chattanooga’s affairs, even as his business interests increasingly demanded attention in New York City.⁹

At his luncheon speech, Ochs had proposed terraced “hanging gardens,” which would take advantage of the geographic features of Lookout Mountain’s bluffs. The gardens would exhibit the indigenous flora and, as the landscape architect for the project proposed, “a unique waterfall” supplied by “water piped to the top of the mountain.”¹⁰ Ochs also explained the concept of “hanging gardens” by referencing the legendary hanging gardens of Babylon and a more recent example in Heidelberg, Germany. The Heidelberg city park served as a place for the city’s residents to relax and enjoy a combination of both natural and built environments. Careful landscaping complemented the natural beauty of the area, and nature trails led to inexpensive restaurants where even poor residents could afford to purchase refreshments.¹¹

Judging from Ochs’ earliest conceptions of how the park would appear, competing with other cities from around the world was one of his intentions, with the massive hanging gardens figuring prominently in his plans. The scope of the proposed projects, especially in the heady early days of the project, was impressive. In addition to the hanging gardens, “fifty thousand

⁸ Ochs Bio. Ochs Memorial Museum Materials, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

⁹ Ibid.; E.E. Betts, *Map of Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park*, June 25, 1925, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

native shrubs are to be transplanted... a massive playground with hundreds of swings, slides, and other play equipment is planned for the children as well as an amphitheater with parking facilities for several thousand automobiles.”¹²

Yet, despite the glowing language, high publicity, and encouraging pace of land acquisition, the park showed signs of trouble from its earliest days. Primary amongst these concerns was the central role of Ochs himself. As the progenitor of the park, its primary donor, and its most important proponent, Ochs singlehandedly shepherded the project to fruition. Donating sums of money totaling \$105,000 in his own name, Ochs also provided the \$1,000 founder’s subscription for his numerous family members.¹³ In addition to monetary contributions, many of the park’s defining features drew on Och’s initial plans for a natural wonderland. Finally, Ochs contributed not only a substantial portion of the initial investment for land acquisition, but practically the entire yearly maintenance budget for the park.

As the economy worsened in the 1930s, more serious problems appeared. Perhaps a symptom of the Great Depression, in some areas whole plants were uprooted, while in others flowers in peak bloom were cut and allegedly sold for profit by downtown peddlers.¹⁴ Vandalism also increased with each passing year, and Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park finally declared a “war on vandals” in 1933. In addition to vandalism and stealing, nearby residents complained of hunting on park land throughout the early 1930s, providing another example of local residents facing economic difficulties using the land for personal benefit. This represented a particularly troubling problem that had not been reported in the previous five years,

¹² “Garden Shapes Into Reality,” *The Chattanooga Times*, November 29, 1930; Report of Activity, Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park, March 2, 1931, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

¹³ Report of Activity, Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park, March 2, 1931, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

¹⁴ “More Park Thefts Draw Declaration of War on Vandals,” *The Chattanooga Times*, February 4, 1933.

and when considered in conjunction with the other offenses, reflects a possible return to viewing the mountain as a “commons.”¹⁵ The western slope, which park plans proposed leaving in a relatively natural state, was the most frequently offended area, as it was in this area that the careful introduction of wildlife resulted in the substantial populations of quail and pheasants which enticed hunters.¹⁶

Even as the park seemed assaulted from every angle, in 1933 the Federal government established several Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps around Chattanooga. The use of CCC labor at Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park was unusual.¹⁷ Altogether, the CCC camps were expected to bring approximately \$100,000 a year in Federal funding, completely replacing the operating budget for Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park with CCC labor.

The timing of the CCC’s arrival benefited the park immensely. As of result of the combined effect of fires, vandalism, and neglect, by 1933 the park had fallen into disrepair and large areas were overgrown with scrub brush. Adolph Ochs, who served as both the greatest financial contributor and the source of inspiration for the park, was in declining health. Although hiking groups continued using the park, by 1933 the founders scrapped many of the original plans, including the terraced gardens. CCC laborers set to work clearing brush, improving fire breaks, and restoring some of the landscaped areas to a sustainable status.¹⁸

The introduction of the CCC camp was the first contribution of the federal government to the park, but following the troubles of vandalism and fire the park’s founders realized the

¹⁵ For an explanation of the role of the commons in Appalachia, see John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 83-156; Kathryn Newfont’s *Blue Ridge Commons: Environmental Activism and Forest History in Western North Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

¹⁶ “Hunter Convicted for Park Shooting,” *The Chattanooga Times*, October 2, 1932; Report of Activity, Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park, March 2, 1931, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

¹⁷ “...Approves Spot for CCC Camp,” *The Chattanooga Times*, October 21, 1933. Lookout Mountain was not the only place CCC camps were established on land under private ownership, but it was indeed the exception to the rule.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

benefits of federal management. The transition from a privately supported park to a component of the federally managed National Park System was swift. A “miscellaneous note” in the Report of Activity from 1931 indicated a “survey [of the park founders] with relation to interesting the National Government in the Park.”¹⁹ The timing of the park’s transfer may indicate reluctance by Ochs to convey the property to the military and a preference for donating the property to the National Park Service. 1933 was a watershed year for the National Park Service, as it was in 1933 that the Park Service took control of National Military Parks.

The donation of Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain National Park was briefly debated in 1933 before being endorsed with “hearty approval.”²⁰ While the move was universally praised as bringing increased national attention to the park and as a logical addition to the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, some founders were more sober in their reasons for supporting the donation. Frank Spurlock encouraged the donation from the perspective that “the government would take better care of the park than any other agency would.”²¹

Another motivation for donating the park to the Federal government was the substantial cost involved in maintaining the property. Aside from his contributions to the initial founders’ fund, Adolph Ochs provided the daily operating funds necessary for the park’s continued existence and personally contributed nearly \$300,000 by 1934. In addition to Ochs contributions and subscriptions to the founders’ fund, the state government appropriated nearly \$1 million for the maintenance and improvement of roads throughout the park.²² Implicit in Frank Spurlock’s

¹⁹ Report of Activity, Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park, March 2, 1931, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

²⁰ “... To Federal Government; Civic Leaders Praise Act,” *The Chattanooga Times*, January 21, 1934.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² “Officials Okeh Mountain Park as U.S. Project,” *The Chattanooga Times*, March 6, 1934.

comments praising the National Park Service's ability to "take better care of the park," was the observation that under private management the park declined throughout the 1930s.²³

Approved by the park founders in 1934, accepted by the National Park Service later that year, and finalized in early 1935, the donation of Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park to the National Park Service closed an understudied chapter in the history of Chattanooga's growth as a modern city. It remains for historians and citizens of Chattanooga to debate the proper use of Lookout Mountain's preserved areas, but horseback trails, nature paths, and picnic areas all reflect the legacy of Ochs's vision for a place of relaxation on the slopes of the mountain rather than the official mission of the National Military Park to "[preserve] and suitably [mark] for historical and professional military study the fields of some of the most remarkable maneuvers and most brilliant fighting in the war of the rebellion."²⁴ Chronologically, Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park was a short-lived endeavor by a small group of people, yet the path this property took to incorporation into the National Park system represents a distinct departure from traditional narratives of park creation.

Another example of private initiative resulting in public parkland took much longer to develop into a public park, but boasts a higher profile in the park home state than the forgotten Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park. Grandfather Mountain, located in western North Carolina, was a private tourist attraction throughout the twentieth century before it was sold to the state as a park in the early twenty-first century. Hugh Morton, Grandfather Mountain's owner, used language invoking natural preservation, wilderness, and conservation to help sell the mountain to tourists. Over the course of his ownership, the mountain

²³ Report of Activity, Chattanooga-Lookout Mountain Park, March 2, 1931, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park Archives, Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

²⁴ John C. Paige and Jerome A. Greene, *Administrative History of Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park*, chapter VII.

developed into a recognizable symbol for wilderness and natural beauty, and through association with these concepts the peak attained public recognition as a natural enclave. This public support created a debate between environmentalists and Hugh Morton in the late twentieth century over the development of Grandfather Mountain. The argument exhibited much of the language used in the wider national debate over appropriate use of natural resources.

The growth of the environmental movement and Morton's own celebratory language encouraged the identification of Grandfather Mountain as an idyllic wilderness. As the mountain attraction grew in popularity, Morton carefully nurtured a public perception of the mountain as a wild and pristine reserve. A man of substantial monetary resources and undeniable charisma, Morton was widely known for championing environmental causes like fighting air pollution and ridge top construction. He was also widely known as the developer and owner of one of the most ecologically significant areas in North Carolina, and his role as a developer met with criticism in some circles. His personal role in the environmental movement, his advertising campaigns that emphasized the natural beauty of Grandfather Mountain, and his personal association with the mountain, created a perception that did not always reflect reality, but ultimately encouraged the conservation of the mountain.

Depending on who tells the story, Hugh Morton was either a noble protector of the Blue Ridge's highest and most notable mountain, or a savvy businessman who profited from the natural beauty of a mountain he despoiled with development.

After a flurry of activity to build a tourist attraction in the 1960s and 1970s, Morton promised no further development of his own properties as "the main attraction of Grandfather Mountain is its natural beauty," which only needed preserving so that "when the cotton candy

and Ferris Wheels are gone, we'll still be in business."²⁵ Morton's environmentalist credentials came under fire in 1990 when environmental groups confronted him about the planned development of a 900-acre area called the Wilmor tract. Located on the farthest northwestern slope of Grandfather Mountain, the plan for the property initially included condominiums, single-family housing, a strip mall, and a fast food restaurant. Located near the busy intersection of North Carolina Highways 105 and 184, the property occupied a prime position for a small retail and housing development. At a crossroads for several of the ski slopes, the intersection was also close to the many golf courses and private housing developments that appeared during the late twentieth century.

The debate over Wilmor centered on what qualified as appropriate development of land and engaged a greater debate in the environmental community over whether the goal of environmentalism was *preservation* or *conservation*. Facing criticism from new environmental groups, the man who had owned Grandfather for nearly a half century without developing more than a fraction of the mountain's available land was indignant anyone might imply he intended to harm the mountain.²⁶ That a mountain owned by a man nationally recognized as an environmental leader would need protecting also reveals a curious development in the way Americans thought about natural places. Competing ideas manifested themselves as either *conservation*, the notion that careful development and management of natural areas is acceptable on some level, or *preservation*, which attempts to completely rope off natural areas from human intervention. Morton subscribed to notions of conservation, not preservation, as evidenced by his

²⁵ Barry Bearak, "Condo on Peak Alters View of Mountains, Law, Land," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1983, A4; *Mountain Ridge Protection Act of 1983*, NC General Statute § 113A-205-219, 676th Cong., Session 1.

²⁶ Bruce Henderson, "Fight for Grandfather Mountain: Battle Lines Drawn over Plans to Develop Blue Ridge Tract," *Charlotte Observer*, April 2, 1990.

initial development of Grandfather Mountain as a tourist attraction, its gradual expansion throughout the twentieth century, and his continued willingness to develop other properties.

Many of the new groups opposing Morton felt that any development of Grandfather Mountain, especially with its rare habitats and endangered species, was an unnecessary environmental risk. The debate over Wilmor also cast into sharp relief some of the political struggles within the larger environmental movement. While groups like the Friends of Grandfather Mountain characterized Morton as acting against the interests of the mountain and therefore falling outside their favor, other groups treated the situation delicately. The Sierra Club, when asked about the Wilmor tract, offered a diplomatic response that acknowledged Hugh Morton's contributions to other environmentalist causes, like air pollution, and concluded that they felt criticism of Morton might prove counter-productive.²⁷

The uproar over Wilmor forced Morton to consider the mountain's future in new ways. Shortly after the first critiques of Morton's environmentalist credentials appeared in newspapers in 1990, Morton announced an effort to permanently protect the summit of the mountain from development and began placing easements on the 1,766 acres through organizations like the Nature Conservancy.²⁸ In the middle of the public debate over land use at the headwaters of the Linville River, Morton received the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Award and designated approximately 2,000 acres as permanently safe from development. Morton also published a collection of photographs with a distinctly environmental overtone, and the publicity for the book regularly touted his accolades.²⁹ As Morton entered the twenty-

²⁷ "Fight for Grandfather Mountain," *Charlotte Observer*; Jack Horan, "Dispute Over Grandfather Mountain Preservation Escalates," *Charlotte Observer*, February 1, 1992; Bruce Henderson, "Fight for Grandfather Mountain: Battle Lines Drawn over Plans to Develop Blue Ridge Tract," *Charlotte Observer*, April 2, 1990.

²⁸ "Mr. Morton's Mountain Easements Will Protect Priceless Piece of North Carolina," *Charlotte Observer*, February 26, 1991.

²⁹ "Hugh Morton's North Carolina," *The Mountain Times*, September 18, 2003; Marth Quilin, "Carolina in His

first century, there was little question his legacy was complicated. In 2004, when he passed the formal leadership of Grandfather Mountain, Inc. to his grandson Crae, Hugh Morton continued the tradition of family ownership of Grandfather Mountain. When he finally stepped down from leading daily operations and released personal control of the peak, Morton had donated nearly 4,000 acres of conservation easements to the North Carolina Nature Conservancy, which was one of the largest single-donor tracts in the organization's history.

Upon his death in 2006, newspapers throughout North Carolina universally praised Hugh Morton as a one of the state's most noteworthy citizens. Most mentioned his role as a developer, with many obituaries managing to blend Morton's competing legacies. Far from presenting a problem, Morton's double roles merged seamlessly into a story of a legendary man who developed the mountains in an "appropriate" way. Morton's exceptionalism was noted, with one mourner asking, "how many people do you know who are a combination of a developer and an environmentalist?"³⁰

Taking the whole of Morton's life, it is necessary to dispel the myths of a noble environmentalist whose gentle hand guided Grandfather Mountain to its eventual status as a state park. Morton was a businessman who used environmentally friendly language and the natural beauty of his mountain to operate a profitable tourist attraction. Yet for all its inaccuracies, the myth surrounding Hugh Morton did result in the final, permanent preservation of Grandfather Mountain's peaks. In this light, the importance of Morton's contributions to environmentalism cannot be understated. Morton was uniquely poised to shape the ways tourists consumed the commodity of nature and how they viewed his mountain. While promoting Grandfather, Morton cast the place as a natural preserve, and many tourists

Lens: Hugh Morton," *The Raleigh News and Observer*, June 11, 2006; Mary Miller, "North Carolina Through Hugh Morton's Lens," *The Raleigh News and Observer*, September 28, 2003.

³⁰ Tim Whitmire, "Hundreds Gather to Honor Hugh Morton's Memory," *Mobile Press-Register*, June 5, 2006.

came to view the mountain as a park well before its formal incorporation into the state park system. One observer, reflecting on the attraction Morton built at Grandfather, summarized the development by saying “it amounts to a small, private national park. ‘Inoffensively accessible’ was Morton’s...description.”³¹

Whatever mythmaking might surround Morton’s life, he had a profound effect on the mountain’s future. Less than two years after Morton died, the state of North Carolina purchased the undeveloped portions of Grandfather Mountain for \$12 million with the intention of forming a state park.³² “The deal...[was] intended to protect the land and its abundant wildlife from development,” which according to the article “was a lifelong mission of the late Hugh Morton.”³³ It is unclear whether Morton would have donated or sold Grandfather Mountain to the government for incorporation into a park, but his environmentalist reputation influenced his successors to act. In this way, as the attraction entered a new era under public ownership, the myth of Hugh Morton’s selfless stewardship becomes more important to Grandfather Mountain than ever. After years of casting himself as an “ardent environmentalist” and the “guardian of Grandfather Mountain,” the peak he promised to preserve enjoys the type of protection he never managed to give it.³⁴

Through the cases of two Southern mountain parks, this paper explores the connections between private individuals, government entities, and non-governmental organizations in the creation of parklands throughout the American South. While current historiography on US environmental history primarily credits the federal government with the creation of parks and

³¹ “Hugh Morton,” *Wilmington Star-News*, June 4, 2006.

³² Stella Hopkins, “Observer Exclusive: North Carolina to Buy Grandfather Mountain,” *The Charlotte Observer*, September 28, 2008.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bruce Henderson, “N.C. Promotor Hugh Morton Dies,” *The Charlotte Observer*, June 2, 2006; Stella Hopkins, “Observer Exclusive: North Carolina to Buy Grandfather Mountain,” *The Charlotte Observer*, September 28, 2008.

protection of natural wonders, an investigation of parklands in the Southern United States reveals a recurring connection between private initiative and park creation. This initiative grows from many sources, but a common theme emerges that reflects a widespread, sustained interest in nature preservation and in creating spaces for public recreation. This “private path to public parks” merits further investigation.

The secondary literature reflects the importance of non-government sources of nature preservation by focusing on the Nature Conservancy, state parks, wilderness legislation, and the conflicting missions of the National Park Service itself.³⁵ In spite of this scholarly recognition of non-government agencies, the importance of local private individuals in the creation of parklands remains an understudied aspect of American environmental history. Some works, including Karl Jacoby’s *Crimes Against Nature*, chronicle local resistance to the imposition of new rules governing land incorporated into national parks. But this focus on local actors emphasized resistance to parks that were seen as imposed on the land by an outside authority. Without abandoning Jacoby’s emphasis on the local impact of parks, future scholarship should also seek to examine the role locals played in locating parks in their communities. Particularly emphasizing the period before the advent of organizations like the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land, this new scholarship should also seek to understand the relationship between local actors and their governments from the perspective of changing attitudes towards government authority, the role of the state in society, and local motivations for creating protected areas.

³⁵ For a good explanation of the Park Service’s dilemma over “preservation of wilderness” or “recreation,” see John C. Miles, *Wilderness in National Parks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 3-8.