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Opinion: Protect Moccasin Bend and its cultural, historical assets for future generations

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by Major McCollough

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Photo/Getty Images / A view of Moccasin Bend in Chattanooga, Tenn.

(Editor's note: Last in a series)

We've heard much over the last few months about how important Moccasin Bend National Park is, and how unwise it would be for the state to build a new hospital there. What we've heard is true enough. The national park is, indeed, important. Building a new hospital there is, likewise, a terrible idea. These are facts, and as such they should be clear. But no one has articulated the true crux of the problem. As poor ideas go, the state's plan to keep the Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute on the peninsula could hardly be worse. It represents an egregious misunderstanding of the Bend's historical contents and geography, and of its historical and sacred significance, particularly the degree to which that significance imbues the entire Bend, including the proposed building site. Quintessential political overreach. Heedless to common sense, existing federal designations and established congressional intention, the state

continues its march towards spoiling one of Chattanooga's richest treasures before it has had a true chance to be appreciated.

State officials think that the area they have selected for the new hospital is "tucked away" and "remote" on the Bend because they are thinking of state's own remaining piece of property there, not what may adjoin it that is already in the national park. They think that if standard archaeological survey/testing on the small hospital site does not in itself appear to be of national-level significance, they will be free to build there. But that issue was fought and resolved long ago, and that is why the National Historic Landmark encompasses the entire lower Moccasin Bend and its archaeological riches, not just bits and pieces of it.

Far from being "tucked away," the state-selected location for the new hospital will be in the middle of the park as it was always meant to be. In 2003, Congress determined the park should ultimately be a single contiguous unit, free from the patchwork of state, city and county inholdings (i.e., the city golf course, the city/county police firing range, and the outdated state mental health hospital). At the time, as a path of least resistance, Congress felt the inholdings would be phased out gradually, relying on the word of their state, city and county partners. Unfortunately, these inholdings in the park have caused turmoil and damage ever since.

Most importantly, the state's new hospital site is unquestionably adjacent to, overlooking, and possibly even within, the most important and sacred resource already inside the official park boundary.

The Hampton Place site is a large 15th and 16th-century, double-palisaded Native American town that was bustling with hundreds of inhabitants, tending their houses and crops and venerating the graves of their ancestors, at exactly the same time (1540) that Spanish conquistador Hernando De Soto made the first European contact with the native peoples of this region. In 1539, he invaded into our interior in search of gold. DeSoto marched through the Chattanooga area with his army of 500 knights in armor, 220 horses and

hundreds of retainers, bringing epidemic diseases and disruption to the indigenous people — a vicious but extremely significant turning point in American history.

Situated as it is, Hampton Place would have been able to control the shoals and passage on the Tennessee River just above the mouth of the Tennessee River Gorge. The town contains more Spanish trade and gift items than almost any other in the nation. It represents the deepest interior point in the Southeast reached by the DeSoto expedition. In ensuing years, Chattanooga became a main bulking point in the fur trade between Native Americans and Europeans. The town was burned about this time, and the fallen houses were buried and sealed, creating an archaeological site similar to Pompeii. The fire was apparently so unexpected and fast moving that the people had to flee without their belongings. Many may have died within the palisades. These were the inhabitants of Chattanooga of the 1500s, and from their towns they could field more warriors than any other population center in the Tennessee River valley.

Hampton Place is just one of the historic treasures of Moccasin Bend. There is no doubt that this historic feature is of high significance to the nation, to Chattanooga's relevance nationally as a great American central place throughout prehistory and history, and to the Native American descendants of the people who lived on and are buried in its soil.

The state's proposed new hospital building would adjoin and loom over Hampton Place in the middle of Moccasin Bend national park, degrading the sanctity, natural setting, and viewshed of Hampton Place and the rest of the 1,000-acre park. It would be the worst possible intrusion and "nonconforming use" in the worst possible location in the National Park, damaging the quality of visitor experiences in the park and the interpretation of what happened here in the past.

This improperly planned and sited hospital project should not move forward. Though we might well expect it, the National Park Service is not likely to intervene directly on behalf of the historic resources in this crisis. So, private

citizens, again, have to stand in the Bend's defense. Please make your voices heard by the governor, state, and local lawmakers and leaders, and the National Park Service – before politics and apathy overcome local control and good judgment.

Major McCollough earned his doctoral degree in archaeology from the University of Pennsylvania. He conducted much of the definitive research that led to the successive federal designations of the Moccasin Bend National Register of Historic Places District (1983), the Moccasin Bend National Historic Landmark District (1986), and the Moccasin Bend National Park (2003).



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