

Eastern National Parks and the Appalachian Trail

by Ron Hamlin

A national park in Georgia? Ocmulgee National Historic Site in Macon has been under consideration as Georgia's first national park and preserve, but one hundred years ago this year there was another effort to create a national park in the northern part of the state and in several other locations throughout the Southeast.

In the early twentieth century, there were no national parks in the southern U.S. In fact, the only national park east of the Mississippi a hundred years ago was Acadia National Park in Maine (first designated Lafayette National Park from 1919 to 1929). From 1872, when Yellowstone National Park became the world's first national park, until the 1930's, with the exception of Acadia, all of the national parks were in the West, where vast tracts of land were owned by the people of the United States in the form of the federal government.

Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service, recognized that most visitors to the national parks in the West were residents of the eastern U.S. Those who could afford a trip to those great national parks in the West were generally in the upper class. Very few, if any, in the low- to middle-economic classes could afford to make such a trip. So, in hopes of making national parks accessible to the general population, Mather proposed a commission to identify locations that might be suitable for national parks east of the Mississippi River.

At the same time, a movement was developing in Knoxville and Asheville to preserve the vast and largely undeveloped areas in the Great Smoky Mountains that were threatened by private timber interests.

In February 1924, the Secretary of the Interior, Hubert Work, heeding Mather's request and the growing development in the southeast, established a committee to study locations in the southern Appalachians to determine an area worthy of preservation as a national park. It is worth noting that one of the people selected to serve on that committee was William Welch, the General Manager of the Palisades Interstate Parkway Commission at that time. He would become the first Chairman of the Appalachian Trail Conference a year later.

The committee established by Secretary Work became the Southern Appalachian National Park Commission. States, businesses, and regional promoters began to put together proposals addressed to the commission and to members of Congress touting the natural assets of their regions and the reasons that a national park should be situated near them. The benefits of tourism as a result of a nearby national park would be a huge economic boost to any successful region.

More or less parallel to these events, the Appalachian Trail had been proposed by Benton MacKaye in 1921. The first section had been built on Bear Mountain in New York state in 1922, within the boundaries of Welch's Palisades Interstate Park. By 1924, the project had been widely publicized and was fairly well known up and down the Appalachian mountain range. While it would be several years before work began on the A.T. here in Georgia, it was fairly well established by 1924 that the preferred location for the southern terminus of the fledgling trail would be somewhere in the north Georgia mountains.

Louis B. Magid was a businessman and entrepreneur who lived in the Tallulah Falls area of Georgia. According to his biography, Louis was born and raised in Germany and relocated to the northeastern U.S. with his parents after graduating from university. In 1901, he traveled south to Tallulah Falls. As he had been managing the Magid-Hope Silk Company in the northeast, he felt that the climate in northern Habersham County would support silkworms, so he began purchasing land and planting it with the mulberry trees that the worms need to produce silk. He also started his own company in Habersham County, the Sericulture and Manufacturing Company of America, Inc., to create silk fabric.

In a letter to legislators in March 1924, Magid promoted the Tallulah Falls region for national park status, listing many reasons why a national park should be located in Georgia, one of which being that:

"It would be fitting and appropriate to have the national park located in north Georgia, this being the most southern end of the Appalachian mountain range and where the Appalachian trail, from Maine to Georgia, will have its terminus, so that hikers may have a goal to reach at the end of their trail--the southern national park in Georgia."

By the time of this national park proposal, a large portion of north Georgia, 150,000 acres, had already been purchased by the Federal government under the authority of the 1911 Weeks Act. Some saw this Federal ownership as an advantage in creating a park. Others argued that creating a national park out of this land would lock up the resources. National parks, by their very nature, preserve the resources within them while national forests are managed for multiple uses, including managed timber harvesting and recreation.

In the end, the Southern Appalachian National Park Commission did not recommend a national park for Georgia, but did ultimately recommend three parks: Mammoth Caves in Kentucky, Shenandoah in Virginia, and the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee; but we can proudly say that the Appalachian Trail starts - or ends - here. The state, and north Georgia in particular, attracts thousands of hikers every year from other parts of the country and the world to enjoy the trail and the scenic beauty which is found along the A.T. here in Georgia.

Sources:

The Atlanta Constitution
Georgia Tech Archives & Special Collections

Georgia the Place!

Washington dispatches announce that a committee, just appointed by the secretary of the interior, will choose "a site for a national park in the Southern Appalachian mountains."

Representative Temple, of Pennsylvania, has accepted the chairmanship of the committee.

This is the first direct step in the most important movement of the kind made by the government in a generation.

National parks in numbers have been established in and west of the Rocky mountains, and yearly they attract millions of visitors from all the states, and from other nations.

The Atlanta Constitution, March 5, 1924

Magid Shows Why State Should Get National Park

In a letter addressed to Congressman Gordon Lee, of the seventh district of Georgia, Louis B. Magid, of Tallulah Park, has set forth in concise and impressive manner various reasons why the north Georgia territory should be selected by the national forest committee for the new "national park" now proposed for the southern Appalachian mountains.

Congressman Lee is a member of the committee appointed by Secretary Work to select this park site. Mr. Magid has sent copies of his letter to each of the five members of this committee as well as to each of the Georgia congressmen and senators in Washington in order to enlist their cooperation in securing this great national park development for north Georgia.

The Atlanta Constitution, March 28, 1924