

“Mounds of Controversy: Is Sacred Tribal Land in the Path of Progress”

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Stan Cartwright looks out from the 1,000-year-old village site at Ocmulgee National Monument and considers the war over the land spread before him.

To the west, across the Ocmulgee River, the church spires and office buildings of modern Macon rise from the last of the Piedmont hills.

South of him the Great Temple Mound climbs 45 feet before the land drops off to river bottomland that was farmed when Romans ruled the Mediterranean world.

"Unless we listen to the voices these winds are bringing us, there'll be nothing left of our history for our grandkids to see," says Cartwright, whose grandmother was Creek Indian.

The Great Temple Mound and the Lamar Mounds, earth structures built by highly organized Indian tribes, are the Southeast's versions of the Pyramids. They are preserved in separate sections of the national monument. A mile or so of privately owned forest, wetlands and overgrown fields lie between them.

They have become the latest battlefield in a familiar fight between Georgia's past and future. A push to build a segment of freeway between the mounds has landed the Monument on a list of the 10 most endangered national parks in the country.

Macon's business and political leaders say bringing the Fall Line Freeway between the mounds is the most direct way to connect the city's dying industrial heart to a key transportation corridor.

More than half the 215-mile road, which will connect Columbus to Augusta, already has opened or is under construction. Macon leaders want to make sure it comes through, not around, their city.

Larry Justice, the former Bibb County Commission chairman, pushed hard when he was in office to see that happen. "Foremost, you have to think about your community and what it's going to do for your community," he said. "If our forefathers hadn't looked to the future and blazed a way to the west, with railroads and roads and interstates, Lord have mercy, we would have had a mess today."

Cartwright questions the wisdom of sacrificing the past for the future.

"We are building highways faster and faster and leaving our history behind," he said.

The route between the mounds also seems to have the support of the state Department of Transportation.

After examining more than a dozen routes, the DOT determined the alignment was best --- though the department's studies concluded it would harm the greatest number of historic sites, disturb more sensitive natural areas and be the only one visible from the Temple Mound. It would also be among the most expensive to build.

Even after its decision was challenged by federal highway officials --- who hold the purse strings --- the DOT has been reluctant to abandon the route, which has potent political support.

Past vs. future

Every time a new freeway is blazed, there is a trade-off. Georgians give up something --- archaeological sites, neighborhoods, green space, historic buildings, quiet --- for a shot at a better future --- new jobs, convenience and faster, safer transportation.

Alan Cook, the former Muscogee (Creek) Nation tribal historian, said the roadway between the mounds will destroy traces of history and more.

The mounds are like Gettysburg battlefield, he said.

"That exists as a monument to those who died on both sides, but is also a part of the expression of [Americans'] history of their soul. And there is no way in hell you are going to tolerate a discussion of a road that bisects that. But that's what you would be doing by further violating this region," he said.

Bibb's businessmen and politicians say they are proud of their past, including the Indian mounds. It was, after all, their parents and grandparents who raised the money during the Depression to buy the land for the monument.

Calder Pinkston, the former president of the Macon-Bibb County Industrial Authority, believes the benefits of the connection would outweigh the harm. "We are not trying to be insensitive to someone else's needs," he said. "It's of vital economic importance to Bibb County and the state."

Macon was once a vibrant economic center. From Reconstruction to the middle of the 20th century, its successful businessmen built some of the most elaborate homes and notable buildings in the state. Much of that past has been beautifully preserved --- Macon has more listings on the National Registry of Historic Places than any other city in Georgia. But many of those buildings are empty.

During the 1990s, while many of the counties surrounding it showed double-digit growth, Bibb County grew 2.6 percent, according to U.S. Census data.

The growth that has come in the last 20 years has occurred outside Macon, along I-75 and I-16.

The pull of the interstates has emptied many of Macon's businesses, said Conie Mac Darnell, president of New Town Macon, a downtown redevelopment organization.

"There are some neighborhoods here in Macon that have literally wilted on the vine," he said. "People have moved farther and farther out, leaving people behind that couldn't afford to move out."

Macon's 1,700-acre industrial heart is choked with weeds and rusting. It provides few jobs for city residents.

The county and state spent millions to build a four-lane connector from I-75 to the industrial zone. The connector ends right across the Ocmulgee River from the monument, limiting its ability to revitalize the area.

Business and community leaders have always wanted to push the connector across the river, joining east and west Macon and tying the old industrial zone with a newer one. But they lacked the money to continue.

When the state began planning the Fall Line Freeway, some proponents saw an opportunity. They figured linking the freeway with their connector would help them finish it.

They organized public demonstrations and letter-writing campaigns by businesses.

Justice and others pushed the county to hire Washington lawyers at \$3,500 a month for legal advice, lobbying and strategizing to get the route approved.

The DOT agreed to look at the route as a possibility for the freeway in the Macon area.

The extension's opponents also coalesced. Jack Sammons, a law professor at Mercer University, helped organize citizens who were opposed to the route. They helped get the attention of the National Register of Historic Places, which in 1997 listed the land between the mounds as a Traditional Cultural Property. The listing is similar to that of a historic neighborhood.

"Except in this case, the neighborhood is two- or three-thousand years old," Sammons said.

The listing created a new set of federal hurdles for the state, which must now prove the route is the only prudent, feasible alternative before federal money can be spent building the highway there.

If the state can prove it is the only feasible route, it must minimize harm to historic or ecological sites when it builds. The state also must consult with American Indian tribes whose ancestors lived there.

The tribes don't have veto power, but their resistance can make getting approval more difficult.

The state flew Cook and other tribal leaders in for review and consultation during the 1990s. The tribal members were ready to consider the city's needs, Cook said, but the state had to meet a high standard.

"We felt like it's one of our greatest monuments and historic resources that can be used to amplify parts of our history," he said.

A view of history

Park Superintendent Jim David says the Great Temple Mound is the only spot where a person can take in the entire sweep of human history in Georgia in a few glances.

A 10,000-year-old spear point made by an Ice Age man was found by the river. The undeveloped private land between the mounds includes village and burial sites covering layers of Indian history, the area where Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto is believed to have made Europeans' first foray into the Southeast interior in 1540, the place where the Creek Confederacy came together in the 1600s, and cornfields and villages described by naturalist and wanderer William Bartam in the 1770s.

The mounds were excavated in the 1930s as part of a public works project.

The items turned up showed the richness and complexity of the culture that built the mounds. Thousands of mundane and extraordinary objects --- clay pots, a headdress made from copper plates and jaguar jaws, smoking pipes and shell medallions incised with otherworldly figures, enough spear and arrow points to make a Boy Scouts' eyes bulge --- are now preserved in the museum's collection.

Archaeological surveys on the land between the mounds show that despite farming and logging over the years, it still contains historic riches.

Cook said after the tribe consulted, they decided other freeway routes could serve Bibb County's needs while leaving the Traditional Cultural Property undisturbed by the highway. The tribal council passed a resolution against routing the road there.

Despite the opposition, the state's preliminary studies named the route as the preferred one in 2000.

The Federal Highway Administration disagreed. After reviewing the DOT's studies, it rejected them. It concluded the route the DOT chose was the worst of those considered.

Tom Turner, the head of preconstruction for DOT, still says the route between the mounds offers the best transportation benefits. But he declined to elaborate or respond to the highway administration criticisms, saying that DOT would answer them in the next revision of the studies.

Political pressures

Until the route is selected, a proposed donation to the national monument is on hold.

Scott Thompson said his family has owned land near the monument for 190 years. They decided to give 300 acres to the national monument, which would nearly tie together the two sections.

David, the park superintendent, said that after internal discussions, the National Park Service believed it would not get the local political support it would need to accept the donation. The plot lies in the path of the route between the mounds.

The NPS gave the land to the Archaeological Conservancy to hold in trust until the controversy is settled.

Politics surrounding the freeway were also responsible, in part, for the resignation of the state's former Historic Preservation officer.

Mark Edwards began to question the negative impact of the freeway and other road projects on Macon's historic properties in the late 1990s.

He wrote a letter in 1998 to then-Macon Mayor Jim Marshall outlining his concerns and saying the politicians and planners in Bibb County were shutting out anyone's opinions or concerns other than their own.

He said he was pressured to not send the letter.

Ben Porter, a Macon businessman and route proponent, was then the chairman of the Department of Natural Resources. The DNR oversees the Historic Preservation officer. Porter saw the letter and objected to it.

A few months later, Edwards resigned in frustration.

Edwards, reached by phone in Washington, D.C, where he now works for a private firm, said he stands by the letter, which he gave to Marshall when he resigned.

"The thing I couldn't understand, I just couldn't get my head around, was why local government acted in a way I viewed as totally irresponsible and not taking into account its own citizens and its own heritage," he said.

"What I was seeing had a local political process shutting the door on those interests in a pretty decisive manner. I don't think that's good government."

Porter, still a DNR board member, denied Edwards' assessment.

"He just disagreed over the routes for some roads," Porter said.

Pierre Howard, a former lieutenant governor and current DNR board member, said struggles like those over the route are not uncommon.

"The DOT would always prefer that their engineers make decisions about where roads go based on engineering considerations, but because of the nature of the issues raised, the question of where roads go are often determined by the political process," he said.

"One of the things that everyone has to grapple with is that there are groups of people who see the issues through a different prism. Some people look at the route that goes through the Indian mounds and see a path of least resistance because you are not having to go through a neighborhood. But there are other people who place a very high value on these types of resources.

"It is a Gordian knot."