

[OUR] EMERALD NECKLACE Past and Present

Transforming neighborhood connectivity
through waterways and green space

By Christi Bowler Elflein | Photography by Craig O'Neal and Nan Kavanaugh
and historical photos provided by Wayne Wood

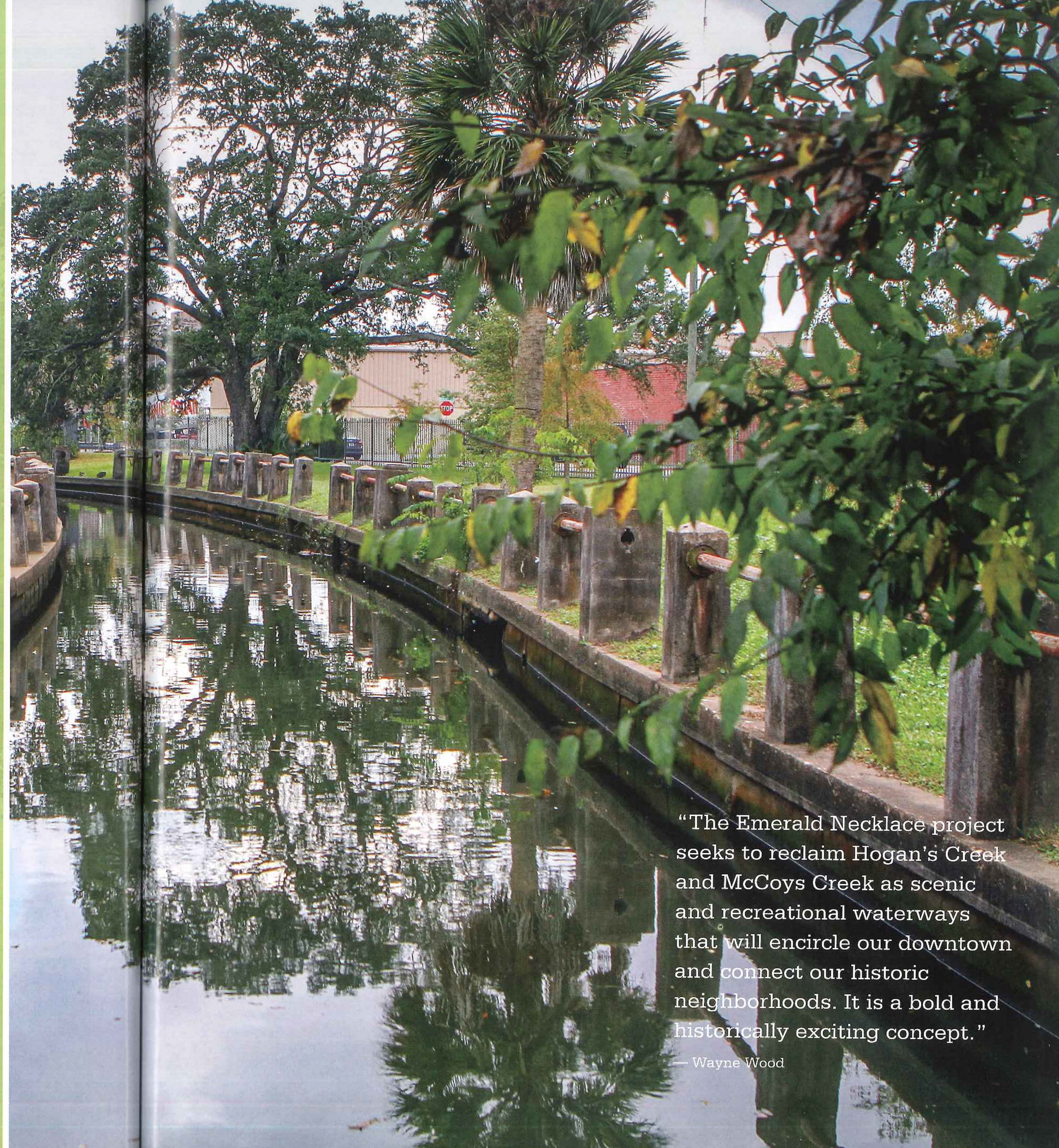
Envision this Saturday morning: you and the family hop on your bikes on the Riverwalk at the Yates Family YMCA. You meander through the trails along the wooded and serene McCoys Creek and continue along the greenway through downtown's neighborhoods. You grab lunch along the way and listen to the music coming from the bandstand in Henry J. Klutho Park. You ride through the rose arbor in Confederate Park, and follow the promenade along Hogan's Creek until it reconnects with the St. John's River, bringing you right back on the Riverwalk where you began.

Downtown activists are hard at work to make this a reality. The vision of an Emerald Necklace, an interconnected system of parks that encircles downtown, has been around for decades. The key natural elements to this vision are Hogan's Creek and McCoys Creek.

Hogan's Creek, located on the eastside of downtown, travels through Springfield, Jacksonville's oldest and most historic neighborhood. McCoys Creek, located on the westside of downtown, travels through the Brooklyn neighborhood and into North Riverside. Both creeks have played significant roles in our city's history. Both have been the victims of neglect. And both waterways provide an opportunity to revitalize neighborhoods.

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— Wayne Wood





Originally named Dignan Park, Confederate Park was once considered the "Central Park" of Jacksonville. The promenade was a bustling public space for the whole city to enjoy.

Once Like Venice, Italy

Both urban creeks hold rich histories. In 1864, Confederates battled Union soldiers along the banks of McCoys Creek during the Civil War. In 1888, the banks of Hogan's Creek was the scene for Jacksonville's World's Fair, dubbed the "Sub-tropical Exposition." In 1901, Hogan's Creek provided a fire break for the Great Fire that destroyed most of downtown Jacksonville. The creek saved Springfield from the same doom. In 1914, Springfield Park, later named Klutho Park, on Hogan's Creek became home to the first Jacksonville Zoo. And in that same year, the United Confederate Veterans held a reunion in Dignan Park, later named Confederate Park, where thousands of veteran soldiers camped.

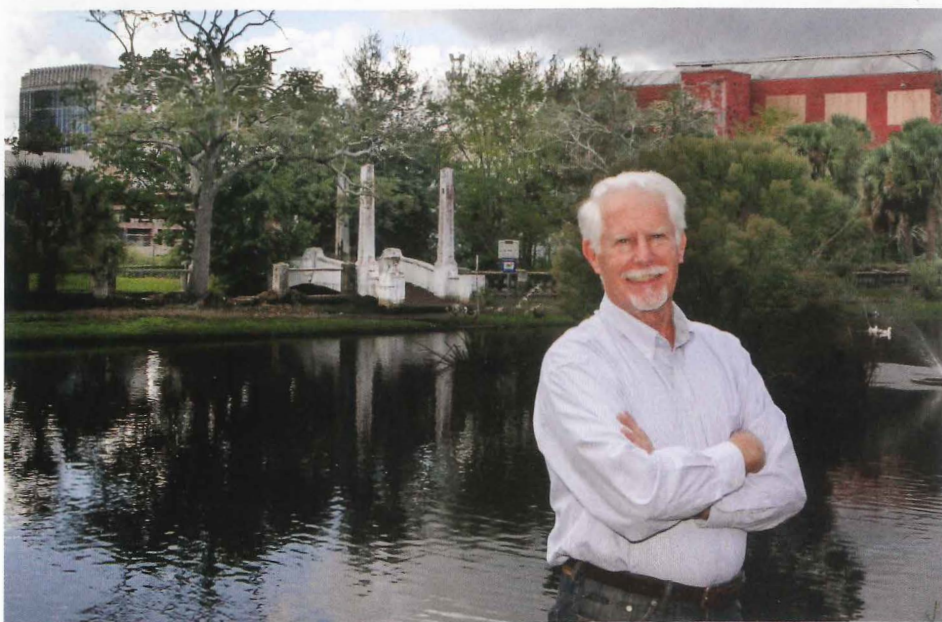
These winding neighborhood waterways were important civic spaces for Jacksonville. They were places where children swam and fished. But as the populations grew up around them, issues arose. Both creeks are tidal, and they were, and still are, notorious for flooding

their surrounding lands. The swampy lands became health hazards as breeding grounds for mosquitos.

The city proposed to put Hogan's Creek underground in a structure in 1927 and issued a half million dollar bond to complete the project. Wayne Wood, local historian and author says, "That was a terrible idea because it didn't solve the drainage trouble. It just moved the water up the creek, plus it wasn't enough money to do it."

Nationally known local architect Henry J. Klutho and city engineer Charles V. Imeson proposed an alternative "hydraulic engineering solution" that fit the budget and utilized the creek as an asset rather than a liability. The project became known as the 1929 Hogan's Creek Improvement Project. The creek was placed in an engineered channel and two basins were created "so that when it flooded they would fill up like retention ponds and take the overflow of the creek," Wood says. Additionally, a promenade was constructed along the creek with about a





From top to Bottom: Local leaders Dawn Emerick, Wayne Wood and Christina Parrish see the revitalization of Hogan's and McCoys creeks as essential to unifying the development of Jacksonville's urban core.

mile of ornamental balustrades and foot bridges creating a beautiful park and walkway through Springfield.

The 1930 McCoys Creek Improvement Project, designed by Joseph E. Craig, aimed to also solve the creek's flooding issues and create a scenic park along its banks. The creek was channelized to allow for boat navigation and barges to access the industrial uses along the waterway.

Both creeks and their associated parks were celebrated and enjoyed. "This was like Venice, Italy," Wood says.

Time, however, was not kind to these creeks. During the 1940s and 1950s, the parks fell into disrepair because the city did not dedicate money to maintain them. Industrial uses including a meat packer, an incinerator and a poultry processor polluted McCoys Creek, making it unsafe. Hogan's Creek silted up. "The engineers of the time...didn't understand Klutho's original design. And so they filled in these little ponds with rubble and removed the balustrades," Wood says. "So they ruined Klutho's design" and made the flooding problem worse.

Navigating Challenges, Building Awareness

Hogan's Creek and McCoys Creek have contamination issues. The parks are in disrepair. When the tides are high, the moon is full and it's rained all day, the parks become a flooded mess.

Regardless, "they are still beautiful parks," says Christina Parrish, executive director of Springfield Preservation and Revitalization (SPAR). And they are an important part of our downtown neighborhoods and all of Jacksonville.

"Klutho Park is Jacksonville's Central Park. It's the largest and most historically significant green space in our urban core, and Hogan's Creek—which stopped the Great Fire of 1901 and kept Springfield from burning—is the most accessible urban waterway," Parrish says. "We need more residents downtown to support development there, and those residents

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need a place like Klutho Park for outdoor recreation and entertainment."

Many of the parks have great amenities. Confederate Park boasts a dog park and a new playground. And Klutho Park has a disc golf course that SPAR raised the money for privately.

"It's been really successful...It's changed the atmosphere," Parrish says. "There are always people in the park now because of the disc golf course."

"SPAR has been working really hard to activate the park, to hold events in the park, and just make it a place where people want to come and spend time. And we've been very successful," Parrish adds.

Every Fourth of July, SPAR organizes a baseball game in Klutho Park.

"People who live on the eastside of Main Street play against people on the westside," Parrish says. And about 500 to 600 people attend to cheer on the teams.

This past fall, SPAR held the second annual Jacksonville Porchfest. It was wildly successful with approximately 5,000 people in attendance. Klutho Park was the centerpiece for this event.

"This park was entirely full of people sitting on blankets and chairs all night long, eating, drinking watching the



In Riverside, King Street dead-ends at McCoys Creek. In its heyday, this area of the creek was once dubbed Lovers Lane as people would enjoy walks along its beautiful banks.

concert and having a wonderful time," Parrish says.

Parrish and Wood both recommend seeing downtown by paddling a kayak along the creeks.

Parrish says, "They are both cool to canoe in. It's an amazing experience."

To kayak Hogan's Creek, you have to "start about on Washington St. You'll be shocked when you go behind where Maxwell House is. It's like there is this native bird rookery back there. It's like you are not even in downtown Jacksonville. Then you just pop out in the St. Johns River," says Parrish.

Wood, speaking of McCoys Creek, says, "Once you get in here, it's really cool... It's just amazing."

Today's Grassroots Efforts to Complete the Emerald Necklace Future

Both the city and downtown activists have been promoting reinvesting in Klutho's vision to return the parks to their

original glory. They want to take it one step further and connect the string of parks along Hogan's Creek to a string of parks along McCoys Creek, connecting to the St. Johns River on both sides of downtown as an "Emerald Necklace."

The 2010 Downtown Jacksonville Master Plan called to "Reunite the City with its River." The plan details the Emerald Necklace vision and proposed the McCoys Creek Legacy Project and the Hogan's Creek Legacy Project to implement the vision.

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In 2014, Jacksonville took a big step in the right direction toward implementing this vision. Groundwork Jacksonville was established as part of the Groundwork USA Network, born from a grassroots

organization of downtown activists who want to see the Emerald Necklace become a reality. The non-profit organization is a partnership between the U.S. National Parks Service, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the City of Jacksonville.

Groundwork Jacksonville has several area projects underway, including the completion of the S-Line Rail Trail, a new public market and a tree planting strategy. The Trust's long-term (10-year) vision is to spearhead the completion of the Emerald Necklace.

"Once connected and developed, the Emerald Necklace will promote physical activity, psychological well-being and general health promoting behaviors of residents living on and around the trail," says Dawn Emerick, CEO of Groundwork Jacksonville.

It is an ambitious project, one that requires significant funding from federal, state and local entities. But under the right leadership, it is doable. Boston is a great example of a city that boasts its own "Emerald Necklace" linking neighborhoods through green space and waterways.

Of the vision for Jacksonville, Emerick says, "It will be comparable to any beltway trail system in the country. And it just takes some leadership and an organization to be a facilitator of implementing that vision. That's our grand vision. The time is now...We are going to get it done." 🐾

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