

# ACE Spotlight: Montevallo Preserves its History, Embraces the Future and Has a Heart for the Arts



By Lori Jhons • Communications Director • ALM

**T**he city of Montevallo, incorporated in 1848, is located about 40 miles south of Birmingham in southwestern Shelby County. Its name is believed to be derived from a geographical reference to being a little mountain in a valley. The city has tried to maintain its original charm, character and natural beauty as it continues to grow.

With a population of more than 7,000, Montevallo is home to the state's only public liberal arts college. The University of Montevallo was originally founded in 1896 as the Alabama Girl's Industrial School. The campus is just a short walk from Montevallo's Main Street and historic downtown. The university enrolls approximately 3,000 students annually and is ranked in the top 10 Best Public Regional Universities in the South by the U.S. News and World Report. Montevallo's campus holds a fascinating feature, a star marker designates the approximate geographic center of the state. 

Montevallo is also known for the American Village, a nationally pioneering classroom of American history and civics. This education center has engaged and inspired over a half million students from Alabama and surrounding states since opening in 1999. It is one of the few places in the nation with a full-sized replica of The White House's Oval Office. In addition to serving its primary role, the American Village hosts an annual Festival of Tulips. During its eighth celebration this spring, thousands of visitors strolled through a field of 100,000 tulips in all the colors of the rainbow.

Furthermore, the Alabama National Cemetery is within a short walk from the institution. This 479-acre cemetery serves as the final resting place for thousands of our nation's heroes and is a lasting tribute to the military service and sacrifice of those willing to lay down their lives for our freedom. 

In 2009, city officials began formulating a strategic plan for economic development, infrastructure improvements and revitalization of its historic downtown. The plan also focused on parks and recreation, with activities for youth and seniors. Montevallo's leadership was confident the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program was the best course of action to achieve these goals.

The ACE program, established in 2002, offers select small cities, with populations ranging from 2,000 to 18,000, assistance with resources and tools to help them promote long-term growth and prosperity. ACE understands the uniqueness of each community, recognizing that every city has different assets, values, concerns and priorities. In 2022, ACE became an official program of the Alabama League of Municipalities.

Participating in the ACE program, Montevallo leadership set its sights on completing the comprehensive, three-phase approach to establish long-term goals: assessment; leadership development and strategic planning; and implementation and comprehensive planning. In 2012, Montevallo was proud to earn the distinction of becoming an Alabama Community of Excellence and has continued to move in a positive direction.

Hollie Cost, the former mayor of Montevallo, said at the time, "ACE provided us with a platform to consolidate our vision as a community. They brought us together to develop a strategic plan, and then we had direction. We had a real path for moving forward, so we were able to clearly define our goals as a community."



*Montevallo hosts its annual Festival of Tulips in February at the American Village.*

*The American Village is a nationally pioneering classroom of American history and civics.*



Throughout its more than 200-year history, Montevallo has been a community that has continued to move forward and adapt to changes without sacrificing its historic character. In fact, 73 homes and buildings in Montevallo have earned their place on the National Historic Register. Some, such as Aldrich Coal Mine Museum and Farrington Hall, have become tourist attractions. Being a part of the ACE program laid the foundation for the city to form several partnerships and initiatives over the years to enhance its quality of life.

During the time the city was working on becoming an ACE community, it formed the Montevallo Development Cooperative District (MDCD), which is a unique partnership between the city of Montevallo, Shelby County and the University of Montevallo. The MDCD was created in 2012, under the Capital Improvement Cooperative Districts Section of the Alabama Code, to facilitate capital improvements by acquisition, construction and installation throughout the city. MDCD serves as an example of cooperation among public entities to leverage resources and maximize tax dollars.

Since its creation, MDCD has invested \$11 million with over \$6 million coming from the city and the remainder approximately evenly split between the University and Shelby County. The MDCD's only continual source of funding comes from an appropriation of 90% of the city's 2011 1% sales tax. The funding has supported the downtown revitalization project; building a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) women's softball field and a regulation track, field and lacrosse facility at the University of Montevallo; revitalization of downtown buildings such as the University of Montevallo on Main, which turned an old dilapidated building into classrooms for college students; restroom improvements to Dailey Park, Orr Park and Stephens Park; sidewalk and crosswalk improvements on Highway 25; and resurfacing of the walking track in Orr Park.

In 2016, Main Street Alabama designated Montevallo as a Main Street community. Montevallo Main Street is dedicated to strengthening the historic downtown district by encouraging local spending and tourism through promotion of the arts, education, entertainment, outdoor recreation and historic preservation; enhancing existing businesses; and attracting new development, thereby creating an inviting place where everyone can thrive.



*The University of Montevallo enrolls approximately 3,000 students annually.*



*Montevallo's Main Street Façade Grant Program is offered annually to businesses in the Main Street District.*

In addition to its rich history and beautiful parks, Montevallo is a destination community for art to flourish. Art is not only located throughout the city but also on the University of Montevallo campus. Visitors enjoy the public art trails of sculptures, murals and galleries, like the Pendleton Fire Hydrant Art Trail. Tinglewood Trail in Orr Park offers over 50 whimsical cedar tree carvings created by local artist Tim Tingle. Every year Montevallo

celebrates its art with an art festival in April and the Tinglewood Festival and Art Walk in the fall. Last year, the city welcomed approximately 8,000 visitors and hundreds of vendors to the Tinglewood Festival – the largest ever!

Montevallo is also investing in its future with programs such as Impact Montevallo and the Montevallo Junior City Council (MJCC). Impact Montevallo is a collaborative partnership of concerned citizens raising awareness of youth substance use issues. The program educates youth and adults to take action to prevent youth substance use. Impact Montevallo works closely and partners with student resource officers (SROs) and the MJCC, a group of eighth through twelfth graders that promotes youth involvement in Montevallo through community outreach. The MJCC serves as the voice of the youth in Montevallo.

The city’s current mayor, Rusty Nix, said, “With all the progress we have made, we’re continuing on a positive path. I would highly recommend the ACE program to cities that are interested in finding collaborative partners, funding mechanisms and partnerships. The ACE program will assist your city on how to achieve those goals.” ■

*Photos, top to bottom:  
Montevallo has over 25 murals throughout the city and on the University of Montevallo campus.*

*Montevallo Main Street hosted its inaugural Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) Festival on November 2, 2023.*

*Pendleton Hydrant Parade Trail is a self-guided, 2.6 mile walking adventure throughout Montevallo’s Main Street District*

*Tinglewood Loop in Orr Park boasts more than 50 whimsical tree carvings by local artist Tim Tingle.*

