

Savannah Rapids Romp – Paddle Georgia 2010

June 25–Broad & Savannah Rivers

Distance: 9 miles

Starting Elevation: 160 feet

Ending Elevation: 135 feet

Obstacles/Rapids: From the Augusta Canal diversion dam to Hammonds Ferry, there are numerous shoals. Hammonds Ferry Shoals is a Class II rapid (see entry below), but can be avoided by picking your way through rock and shoals on the Georgia side of the river. **DON'T FORGET! You need a helmet on to run Hammonds Shoals!**

Restroom Facilities: **Mile 0** Restrooms at Savannah Rapids Pavilion
 Mile 5 Hammonds Ferry Porta Toilet
 Mile 8.5 Porta Toilets at Augusta Campsite

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Augusta Canal—Built in the 1840s, the Augusta Canal originally facilitated navigation around the Savannah's shoals and had the added benefit of bringing water and power supply to the city. Today, while Petersburg boats no longer carry goods to points upstream, the canal still provides water and power to the city. Opened in 1846, by 1848 the first mills began popping up along the Canal, harnessing the canal's flow to operate a grist, saw and textile mill. During the Civil War the Canal attracted the huge Confederate Powder Works which supplied munitions for the Confederate Army, and after the war, more textile mills sprang up along the canal—all harnessing the canal's flow to mechanically power looms and other equipment. In 1890, the first hydro-electricity plant went up on the canal, firing up the city's streetcars and streetlights—not to mention the mills and other businesses. But alas, the canal's heyday would soon come to an end. Cheap electricity (Stevens Creek Dam) rendered the canal obsolete in terms of power production and the dawn of railroads had long since eliminated the need for river navigation. From the 1920s through the 1960s the Canal languished and city leaders were left wondering what to do with the historic waterway. There were proposals to build a modern power plant on its banks; there were even plans to drain the watery path and convert it to a road. Ultimately, it was the threat of this power plant and a proposal to develop a golf course between the canal and the river that prompted locals to start a "Save the Augusta Canal" campaign. These efforts led to the preservation and restoration of the Canal's historic structures. In 1996, the canal achieved National Heritage Area status and with the help of federal grants, the area has been transformed into a mecca for paddlers, joggers and bicyclists. From the headgates the canal extends eight miles into downtown Augusta and is paralleled by a recreational trail.

Mile 1—Fish Weir—In the first set of shoals below the Augusta Canal Dam, you'll find a Native American fish weir. Additional weirs can be found in the shoals below the I-20 Bridge. As the archaeological findings of Stallings Island attest, human alteration of the Savannah dates back thousands of years.

Mile 2—I-20—Of Paddle Georgia's six adventures since 2005, only one did not pass beneath an interstate highway (the Flint in 2008). I-20 extends 1,535 miles from Florence, South Carolina to Kent, Texas. The interstate was built in the 1960s and 70s. Before the dawn of railroads and automobiles, the rivers were our superhighways.

Mile 3.5--Augusta Waterworks—You'll see the Augusta Waterworks pumping station at river right sitting on land between the Canal and the river. The structure began pumping the city's drinking water from the canal in the 1890s. Today, the City of Augusta pumps from 24 to 45 million gallons a day from the Canal to provide Augustans with water.

Mile 3.5—Hammond Shoals—Hammond shoals stretches across the width of the Savannah, interrupted by a series of mid-river islands. These shoals mark the last gasp of the Piedmont on the Savannah. The shoals are named for a Hammond (John or Leroy...the history books are not clear) who attempted to establish a tobacco and cotton trading center here in 1790 called Campbell Town as a rival to traders on the Augusta side of the river. Hammond ran a successful ferry here and the competition to broker the products of the region's farms became intense. In 1799, legend has it, Hammond was mysteriously killed. Campbell Town did not recover and the Georgia businessmen (and Augusta) would ultimately go on to dominate the local economy.

On the Georgia side of the river, Hammond Shoals drops gently along a series of shoals. On the South Carolina side, the drop is more precipitous and creates a Class II rapid. If you wish to run this rapid, you will need to stay left of the islands that split the river below I-20. The rapid is best run on far river left. Look for safety boaters to give direction.

Mile 4.5—Rae's Creek—Golf fans will recognize this name. Rae's Creek bisects some of professional golf's most holy ground, "Amen Corner" at the Augusta National Golf Club. Rae's drains much of the course and Augusta before filling Lake Olmstead, a lake created in 1872 during an expansion of the Augusta Canal. The once proud lake, which in its heyday hosted an amusement park along its shores, has been beset by stormwater pollution, including loads of sediment and tons of trash washing off the developed landscape. Residents recently passed a local option sales tax that included plans to dredge the lake and revitalize it.

Mile 4.5—Rock Quarry & Rock Climbing—Directly opposite Rae's Creek, given proper water levels, it is possible to paddle into the remains of this riverside rock quarry on the South Carolina side of the river. Nothing is mined here now, but the vertical cliffs that remain from the operation are a favorite hangout of local rock climbing enthusiasts.

Mile 7-7.5—Augusta Riverfront—Augusta's riverfront includes the Morris Museum of Art, the Augusta Marriott, a riverfront amphitheater, Oglethorpe Park and Ft. Discovery—a science museum—not to mention row upon row of boat slips. With a population of over a half million people, Augusta ranks as Georgia's second largest city. Riverfront marinas sell snacks and drinks.

Mile 7.5—Augusta's Savannah River Bridges—This rusting behemoth of a bridge marks the site of some of the first bridges to be built across the Savannah. The odd J-shaped structure on top of the bridge is part of a drawbridge mechanism known as a rolling bascule span. The top of the structure holds massive counterweights that when activated allowed the span of the bridge to the right to be raised, allowing the passage of boats. This bridge dates to the late 1910s, replacing one washed out in 1917 floods, which replaced one washed out in 1888 floods. The bridge piers just downstream are all that remains of one of those bridges.

Interestingly, the first railroad bridge across the Savannah at Augusta was not built until the Civil War, despite the fact that railroads existed on both sides of the river in the 1830s. Why? It's a case of communities trying to protect their economic turf. Augusta leaders opposed any junction of the South Carolina and Georgia lines because they feared that Augusta would lose its strategic position as a commercial center. Until the bridge was built in the 1860s, goods had to be off-loaded on both sides of the river and ferried across, making Augusta and Hamburg (opposite the river in South Carolina) key business and transportation hubs. One can imagine the manpower needed to move these goods across the river, giving Augusta and Hamburg leaders even more incentive to preserve these jobs for their communities. Thus, in this odd way, the river shaped economics and politics here from 1830 to 1860.

Mile 8—Jefferson Davis Highway/Head of the South Regatta—On the piers supporting U.S. 1, you'll find the authorized graffiti of college crew teams. This is a legacy of the Head of the South Regatta, a rowing competition held on the Savannah each fall. Rowing competitions originated in London in 1716 with ferrymen competing against one another to determine who could move passengers and goods the fastest.

Mile 8—Savannah & Toxic Pollution—In 2009, a report by the non-profit organization Environment Georgia determined that when it comes to toxic discharges, the Savannah is Georgia's most polluted river—and the fourth most polluted river in the country. In 2007, wastewater treatment facilities and industries discharged more than seven million pounds of toxic pollutants to the river—including 38,000 pounds of chemicals known to cause cancer. Heavy industry in Augusta contributes to this pollution as does industrial facilities located between Augusta and Savannah. The Savannah Riverkeeper, whose office overlooks our take out point, is working to stem this tide of pollutants.