

Barnett Shoals Bop – Paddle Georgia 2011

June 19 – Oconee River

Distance: 15 miles

Starting Elevation: 518 feet

Ending Elevation: 449 feet

Launch Site GPS Coordinates: Lat: 33 52 41.0412 Lon: -83 21 4.6692

Obstacles: **Mile 12 Barnett Shoals Dam**– Caution: Do not approach the dam! Our portage route is on river left near the brick building at the top of the dam. Once you see the buoy line above the dam immediately make your way to river left and follow directions of safety boaters. Barnett Shoals Dam is a lowhead dam. Being “sucked” over the 30-foot-high dam will result in bodily injury and probable death. No one is permitted on any part of the dam structure.

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Whitehall Forest
Mile 4.5	Barnett Shoals Dam
Mile 14.5	Scull Shoals Historic Area
Mile 15	Ga. 15 Oconee National Forest

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—North Fork of the Oconee River & Trail Creek Tragedy—At river left, just below Whitehall Dam, the North Fork of the Oconee River joins the Middle Oconee. Several miles upstream, in July 2010, a fire at an Athens chemical plant resulted in the spill of a toxic stew to Trail Creek (a North Oconee tributary) that turned the stream the color of porta-toilet water (the business made bathroom disinfectant chemicals). Among the chemicals released were methanol, a nervous system toxin; paradichlorobenzene, a suspected carcinogen; and formaldehyde, which cause allergies and cancer. As firefighters worked to control the fire, the water they poured on the flames hastened the discharge of pollutants to the stream. An undetermined number of fish and other critters died in the spill. Ultimately, the chemical manufacturer was fined \$15,000 by the state, and by March of this year, EPD said that the stream was meeting water quality standards. However, local watchdog groups, including the Upper Oconee Watershed Network and the Oconee River Project of the Altamaha Riverkeeper, have criticized the state for its slow response during the crisis and for not analyzing wildlife in the stream. Evidence suggests that the chemicals have settled in the creek bottom causing harm to the macroinvertebrates at the start of the aquatic food chain. It will be much longer before Trail Creek fully recovers, they say.

Mile 1—Athens Clarke County Cedar Creek Wastewater Discharge—If you smell something that reminds you of laundry water here, there’s a reason. On river left just downstream from the confluence of the North and Middle Forks is the wastewater discharge from Athens-Clarke County’s Cedar Creek Water Reclamation Facility—Athens’ third and final wastewater discharge. These discharges give the river a decidedly “reclaimed” scent. The county has a permitted treatment capacity of 18 million gallons per day. Soon, a new wastewater treatment facility will be constructed and the Cedar Creek facility will be shuttered.

Mile 3—Barnett Shoals Road, Dam & Reservoir—The Barnett Shoals Road bridge marks the beginning of the mile-long run-of-the-river reservoir created by Barnett Shoals Dam. The current will slow here and the paddling for the next mile will be lake-like. Barnett Shoals Dam was constructed in the early 1900s and provided electricity for the mill and mill village adjacent to the dam. Today, this is just another one of the Oconee’s mill village ghost towns. You’d hardly guess the dam powered a thriving community here. Dr. Roy Ward, a retired physician from nearby Watkinsville, recounted his childhood memories of the village in an *Athens Banner-Herald* article: “After the dam was built, ... On summer nights, we would sit on the front porch of the Ward family home on a rise of ground in Flat Rock and marvel at the spectacle a couple of miles away across the river.” Currently, the dam is not being used to produce electricity (Georgia Power owned a lease on the property until last year). As you paddle up to the buoy line above the dam, test the depth of the water. More than 100 years of sediment has all but filled the reservoir such that even as you near the dam, the water is only a few feet deep. The portage route provides a spectacular view of the dam—the Niagara Falls of the Oconee.

Mile 7.5—Turkey Bend (Wild Turkeys)—Thus named, because on a scouting trip prior to Paddle Georgia, we saw 12 wild turkeys take flight across the river here. Thanks to conservation efforts, wild turkeys have made a comeback in the U.S. as remarkable as the bald eagle has. As America was colonized, the turkeys were hunted and their habitats were destroyed. By the 1930s, turkey populations were such that some feared the species’ extinction. Conservation efforts have resulted in a dramatic increase in populations. By 2000, the nationwide population was estimated at 5.6 million, according to the National Wild Turkey Federation.

Mile 9.5—Non-native Bamboo v. River Cane—On river left are stands of river cane and non-native bamboo. River cane, *Arundinaria gigantea*, is the only native bamboo found in the Eastern United States. River cane can attain heights of 25 feet but generally its trunks do not exceed an inch in diameter. Some species of bamboo, on the other hand, can grow to heights of 100 feet with girths of several inches in diameter.

Mile 10.5—Oconee National Forest—Just downstream of Big Creek marks the boundary of the Oconee National Forest. The various units of the Oconee NF total 116,292 acres and stretch from near Athens through Middle Georgia to Macon. The Forest was first established in 1959 by proclamation of President Eisenhower. Much of the land initially purchased by the federal government was harvested timberland and spent agricultural land. Though “green” now, in the mid-1900s most of it didn’t qualify as “forested.”

Mile 14.5—Scull Shoals Historic Site—The ultimate ghost town of the Oconee, you’ll know you have reached Scull Shoals when you encounter a small rock island in the middle of the river. This pile of rocks once supported the covered toll bridge entering the mill village of Scull Shoals, where in its heyday of the 1850s some 600 people lived and worked. Today, all that’s left are the ruins of some of the old mill structures. The spot was first inhabited by white settlers in the late 1700s and was the site of Ft. Clark, a fort erected to protect those settlers from raiding Creek Indians. In 1811, two ambitious investors set out to establish Georgia’s first paper mill at the site. Using a \$3000 loan from the Georgia legislature, Zachariah Sims and George Paschal established the operation, but it was short-lived and the two were bankrupt within three years. Still, the lure of the Oconee’s water power endured, and by the 1850s, this was a thriving community. Of course, the fortunes of the community depended on the vagaries of the river. During times of drought there was not enough water to power the mills. During times of flood, cotton and equipment were destroyed. Ultimately, it was a combination of poor land management practices and the river that doomed Scull Shoals. Soil washing off the Piedmont’s cotton fields soon filled in the mill pond built on the Oconee. So extensive was the runoff from the fields that a British geologist, Charles Lyell, who traveled the area in the 1840s wrote: “a resident here could distinguish on which of the two branches of the Altamaha, the Oconee or the Ocmulgee, a freshet has occurred, for the lands of the upper country, drained by one of these (the Oconee) had already been partially cleared and cultivated, so that that tributary sent down a copious supply of mud, while the other (the Ocmulgee) remained clear though swollen.” By the 1900s, observers reported that more than half the land had become “submarginal for arable farming by erosion.” The dirt had to go somewhere and that somewhere was the Oconee—and especially at the Scull Shoals dam where the water slowed and the sediment fell out. Over the years, the namesake shoals of Scull Shoals were buried under the Piedmont’s soil. The river gradient that made the site so suitable for water powered mills was eliminated. In 1889 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reported that the mill’s water power failed from “silting of the river below the dam.” Based on these facts and further research, Bruce Ferguson, a professor at UGA’s School of Environmental Design, has concluded that Scull Shoals is now buried under as much as 14 feet of sediment. The land practices of extensive cotton cultivation that fueled the mill’s early success ultimately doomed it.