

Rocky Ford Rumble— Paddle Georgia 2015

June 20—Ogeechee River

Distance: 14 miles

Starting Elevation: 131 feet **Lat:** 32.6490°N **Lon:** -81.8405°W

Ending Elevation: 105 feet **Lat:** 32.5643°N **Lon:** -81.7149°W

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0

Rocky Ford

Mile 8.5

Ogeechee Road

Mile 14

U.S. 301

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Rocky Ford—Our starting point is the location of a natural shallow, rocky ford that was used by early settlers as a passage through the river. The road north leads one mile to the tiny hamlet of Rocky Ford that served in 1793 as the first seat of government for newly formed Screven County. It later became a stop on the Central of Georgia railroad.

Mile .3—Lumber Baron E.E. Foy’s Railroad—The timber bridge pilings here once supported a railroad that connected Portal and the rich timberlands surrounding it in Bulloch County with Rocky Ford, the Central of Georgia Railroad and Foy’s sawmills. The E.E. Foy Company was one of the prominent lumber businesses here in the late 1800s and early 1900s, taping the ancient long-leaf pines that once dominated this area for turpentine and then felling them for lumber. His business model was simple and unsustainable: he purchased the land, cut the timber and then sold the land. From the 1880s to the early 1900s, that business model created boomtowns like Portal where turpentine was distilled (Portal calls itself “The Turpentine City”) and lumber was loaded on the trains. In 1902, an Ogeechee flood damaged the railroad trestle here and shortly after, Foy abandoned Portal. A 1903 article in the *Statesboro News* captured the spirit of this era: “A quarter of a century ago, Bulloch was a great pine forest and majestic pines covered every hill and dale from the Ogeechee to the Canoochee. Enough pine timber was in the county to have built a modern New York... The turpentine men came first and the big and little trees were all boxed until today only a few tracks of virgin timber are standing and it looks like an oasis in a great desert. After the turpentine operations came the sawmill men and the standing timber was slain at an alarming rate, until now timber is a scarce article. The naval stores men are moving away to Alabama and Mississippi and the saw mills will soon have to follow them, yet it had its benefits in the way of opening hundreds of new farms and a great influx of population so that where the stately pines used to grow and sing their weird songs, cotton and corn now grow in wealth in their place.”

Mile 2.1—Strainers & River Improvements—Here the river splits and you will encounter your first strainers. They will not be the last. Depending on water levels, cross-river strainers can be common from here all the way to Ft. Argyle 84 miles downstream. Approach these obstacles with caution. Do not proceed into the obstacle until the boat before you has cleared. Always be prepared to back-paddle. In the event that you are pushed into a strainer, attempt to lean into the obstacle, rather than away from it. This will aid in avoiding a capsize. Today’s paddle will feature no less than 12 strainers. These hazards are nothing new. In 1909 Capt. W.P. Stokely of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers paddled a “bateaux” along our Paddle Georgia route and submitted the following report to Congress: “The reaches (straightaways) have a good width and depth, with a gentle current, and are comparatively free of snags. The river is generally narrower in the bends, the current is much swifter and the cut-offs are quite common. They are generally blocked up by fallen trees and snags.” Despite this, Stokely recommended that Congress appropriate funds to improve the river for commercial navigation. His commanding officers disagreed, telling Congress: “the proposed improvement is not worthy of being undertaken.” Strainers are bad news for boaters but good news for the river. Woody debris creates healthy fisheries.

Mile 4.9—Bridge Pilings—These pilings are of undetermined origin.

Mile 6.2—The Braided Ogeechee—Here the river splits into multiple channels that rejoin nearly 0.3 mile downstream. Such divisions are common on the Ogeechee and persist until the river nears the coast at Ft. Argyle.

Mile 8.4—John Blicht’s Toll Bridge—The wooden bridge pilings upstream of the Ogeechee Road Bridge mark the site of this bridge, one of three bridges that spanned the river in Bulloch County in 1880. Blicht’s widow and children sold the bridge and 227 acres of nearby land to W.H. Blicht in 1889 for \$5,500. W.H. Blicht in 1905 sold the bridge and his property to Eb Lane, and today’s maps identify the new bridge as E.S. Lane Bridge. The purpose of these bridges was to provide Bulloch County farmers access to the Central of Georgia railroad, located just north of the river.

Mile 10.4—King America Finishing/2011 Fish Kill—On river left is the discharge from the King America Finishing (KAF) textile facility. This wastewater discharge was blamed for the 2011 incident that left more than 38,000 fish dead, along with alligators, turtles and birds along a 77-mile stretch of river. Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division’s (EPD) investigation revealed that KAF was liable for fines of more than \$90 million for violations of the federal Clean Water Act, but in 2012 EPD agreed not to fine KAF. Instead, the state agency allowed the company to fund \$1 million worth of “environmental projects” on the Ogeechee. Ogeechee Riverkeeper then sued, arguing that the punishment levied by EPD was inadequate. After a lengthy legal battle, the lawsuit was settled. KAF agreed to spend \$4.5 million to upgrade its wastewater treatment facilities and to pay Ogeechee Riverkeeper \$2.5 million to fund river protection projects. The discharge permit that was negotiated goes above and beyond what EPD had originally required, setting limits on how much waste can be discharged based on water levels in the river—an almost unprecedented requirement in Georgia. The kill also spawned multiple civil lawsuits against KAF. These resulted in, among other things, a 5-year effort to restore the Ogeechee shad fishery. While this was among the worst river pollution tragedies in Georgia history, Ogeechee Riverkeeper turned the tragedy into a triumph, showing the importance of citizen-based river protection groups. Without their intervention, KAF would likely still be polluting the river under a weak permit issued by EPD.

Mile 13.6—Dover & Statesboro Railroad—Completed in 1889, this railroad was Statesboro’s first rail link to the north side of the Ogeechee and the Central of Georgia Railroad. The connection prompted immediate growth in the tiny hamlet, and it made this spot along the river a popular destination for community gatherings. An article in an 1897 edition of the *Bulloch Times* described one such gathering: “It was a phenomenal success from a social standpoint. The crowd carried along their fishing appetites, and even the little mud cats stood out not a ghost of a show. A crowd of fifteen or twenty had gone over the night before to secure the fish for the occasion, and by the dint of hard labor, considerable perseverance and about \$3.20 worth of silver hooks, managed to rake in perhaps a hundred and fifty splendid bream, perch, trout and cats for the day. When cooked and cleaned there was half a barrel of them and it looked like everybody would get a bite, but in five minutes after the table was set, there was barely a fin to be seen. The people went there to eat fish, and they ate them as long as they lasted. (There was also fried chicken). After dinner a barrel of iced lemonade was dispensed to the crowd.” The gatherings were a boon to the railroad; the newspaper reported that the Dover & Statesboro Railroad sold nearly 200 tickets on that day. This line remained the city’s sole connection to the north until 1899.

Mile 13.7—Artesian Well & the Floridan Aquifer—On river right next to the fish camp buildings is an artesian well. In 1881, the first successful deep-water well in South Georgia was drilled on a farm near Albany. Until that time, most believed such endeavors would prove fruitless. My how things have changed! Today, most of South Georgians gets their drinking water from the Floridan aquifer, a vast underground “lake” that stretches across the region. In recent years, there’s been a push to experiment with injecting surface water into this aquifer to “store it” so that it can be pumped out during periods of drought. Where this process, known as aquifer storage and recovery, has been tried in other states it has resulted in the contamination of pristine well water. In other cases, the injected water could not be recovered in the volumes expected. In 2014, a 15-year moratorium prohibiting aquifer storage and recovery in the Floridan aquifer expired because legislation extending it was blocked by the Governor’s office. Georgia River Network is working with other groups to secure protections for the Floridan aquifer (and our state’s other underground water resources).

Mile 14.2—Off-Channel Take Out—Our take out is on river right off the main channel! Watch for signs!

