April 2—Satilla River

Distance: 9 miles
Starting Elev: 10 feet Lat: 31.0212’ N Lon: -81.9040’ W
Ending Elev: 7 feet Lat: 30.9460’ N Lon: -81.8994’ W

Restroom Facilities:
- Mile 0 Douglas Fish Camp
- Mile 3R Fish Camp
- Mile 5.2 Shirley Bluff (Rest stop, but no restroom facilities)
- Mile 8.7 Burnt Fort Boat Ramp

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Satilla—At first blush, the word “Satilla” appears to be one of the many lyrical Native American names for Georgia’s rivers. In reality, the Satilla is one of three major Georgia river basins whose name we believe is not derived from the native language. The first recorded name for the river is attributed to the French explorer, Jean Ribault, who sailed along the Georgia coast in 1562 and called the river “Somm.” Later when Spanish explored the area they reportedly named it “Saint Illa” in honor of a captain in the Spanish army. Saint Illa was the widely used name for the river into the 1800s. An 1874 report of the U.S. Department of Agriculture by irrigation engineer J. M. Miller gives the name St. Ilia for the river. The name St. Ilia is found on churches, roads, cemeteries and even healthcare facilities in southeast Georgia. In the late 1800s, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names officially settled on “Satilla.” As for Ribault, he not only lost naming rights to the Spaniards, he also met an untimely death at their hands. After his ships were marooned in a hurricane along the Florida coast, he and his men were captured and executed. But, perhaps Ribault got the last laugh in modern-day America. When the Six Flag Over Georgia amusement park opened in Atlanta in 1967, one of the original rides was Jean Ribault’s Adventure, a ersatz riverboat ride depicting the dangers facing early Georgia settlers.

Mile 0.7—River Birch—on river left here is a small sandbar sporting young river birches (Betula nigra). River birches do not tolerate shade but love having their feet wet, making them the ideal dweller along river banks that provide both ample sunlight and moist soils. It is best recognized by its bark which flakes off to reveal lighter inner bark. Like many trees, it is a food source for numerous animals. Birds and rodents feed on its seeds, deer eat its leaves, beaver its bark and rabbits munch on its seedlings. The land upon which these trees grow is known as “Blues Island.” Though not an island now, it may have at one time been surrounded by the shifting Satilla.

Mile 2.2—Cut through & Oxbow—One of many cut-throughs and oxbow sloughs along our route, these off-shoots are created when the river erodes an outside bend and captures the downstream bend. This cut through eliminates quarter-mile of the river’s “original” length. The name “oxbow” comes from the u-shaped collar placed around an ox’s neck to which a plow is attached.

Mile 2.5—3R Fish Camp—Where there is high ground, people build, such is the draw of the river. Historically known as Rains Landing, the bluff on river left is now known as 3R Fish Camp, portions of which are owned by the family of Karl Davis of Islands, an accomplished musician who has said he will spin some stories and songs for us. Look for Karl at the first dock at 3R.

Mile 4.3—Allens Ferry—George W. “Dick” Allen lends his name to this historic river crossing and quite a number of descendants. Born in 1837, Allen would ultimately sire 11 children by three wives (a fourth wife died in childbirth along with the infant). A Civil War veteran, he was in a Union prison at the close of the war, but returned to Charlton County where he married in 1868 Mary Ellen Grooms, the daughter of Josiah Grooms. It is perhaps this marriage that introduced Allen to the ferrying business as his wife’s father, Josiah Grooms, operated a ferry downstream at Burnt Fort. Allen died in 1904 and is buried, along with his final three wives, in a family cemetery to the west of this location. The Charlton Archives recounts a story that Allen told of his imprisonment during the war. “He and a comrade had managed to secure some flour and were preparing to have hot cakes and syrup for breakfast, but just before the hot cakes were cooked a Federal officer disc noticed them and they were ordered to imprisonment during the war: “”Indeed, the Satilla is one of the possible choices for “characters” of his day. Historic accounts provide conflicting reports of the man describing him as collectively a testostering Quaker, a “political adventurer,” a “radical dreamer” and a reaper who provided many of the “pioneers” of Georgia’s colonial government. After dismissal from the colonial assembly in 1755, he led a group of mostly landless families into the frontier along the Satilla River in the “no man’s land” between British-controlled Georgia and Spanish-controlled Florida. There he and others set up trade with Spain and local Indians. Though lucrative for what became known as “Gray’s Gang,” the Spanish trade in neighboring Florida was frowned upon by Georgia’s colonial government. Eventually, most in New Hanover withdrew to a settlement on Cumberland Island and then scattered to land around to the St. Mary’s River. It is believed that Gray’s Gang built a fort on this site that was used as refuge by settlers during Indian uprisings and ultimately set ablaze by Indians in the early 1800s, giving rise to the name “Burnt Fort.” By the 1840s new migrants settled here, setting up a sawmill that processed logs harvested far upstream and then floated down the Satilla to this point. Locals interviewed for Alex McQueen’s 1932 book History of Charlton County recalled times when the river was so full of logs that it was possible to walk two miles up river from Burnt Fort on “raft after raft of some the largest yellow pine logs ever grown in Georgia.” A ferry also operated at this location until 1928. The circa-1956 bridge that still spans the river here was named to honor Alva J. Hopkins, a long-time legislator from Charlton County who was instrumental in the construction of Ga. 252 and died in 1961.

Mile 5.2—Magnolia Bluff—The dock on river left here marks the location of Godley Landing, a river landing dating to the 1800s. Beyond the dock is Magnolia Bluff that rises about 50 feet above the river here and runs downstream almost a mile. Magnolia Bluff, like our campsite at Long Bluff, is characterized by a diverse deciduous and evergreen forest dominated by southern magnolia (shiny, dark green leaves and showy, fragrant white flowers and blooms) and some of the trees that hold on to their brown leaves through the winter). In Georgia, these bluff or steephead forests are home to at least 25 species of concern, including plumleaf azalea, Florida anise, bottlebrush buckeye and relict trillium. Opposite Magnolia Bluff, accessible from a slough on river right is Camp Bluff. Turn of the century maps show the river splitting here to form an extensive island opposite Magnolia Bluff, but over the course of the 20th century, the western arm of the river sealed forming Camp and Billys lakes.

Mile 6.8—Billys Lake & Red-breast perch—In the 1932 History of Charlton County, author Alex McQueen boldly asserts that “more fish…have been caught in Burntfort (now known as Billys) lake than any other one spot in the South, and it is still a favorite bedding place of bream and red-breast perch.” Indeed, the Satilla is nationally renowned for its redbreast sunfishery. This beautifully-colored fish know locally as “red bellies” accounts for more than half the fish and stories and songs for us. Look for Karl at the first dock at 3R.

Mile 7.6—Godley Landing & Magnolia Bluff—The dock on river left here marks the location of Godley Landing, a river landing dating to the 1800s. Beyond the dock is Magnolia Bluff that rises about 50 feet above the river here and runs downstream almost a mile. Magnolia Bluff, like our campsite at Long Bluff, is characterized by a diverse deciduous and evergreen forest dominated by southern magnolia (shiny, dark green leaves and showy, fragrant white flowers and blooms) and some of the trees that hold on to their brown leaves through the winter). In Georgia, these bluff or steephead forests are home to at least 25 species of concern, including plumleaf azalea, Florida anise, bottlebrush buckeye and relict trillium. Opposite Magnolia Bluff, accessible from a slough on river right is Camp Bluff. Turn of the century maps show the river splitting here to form an extensive island opposite Magnolia Bluff, but over the course of the 20th century, the western arm of the river sealed forming Camp and Billys lakes.

Mile 8.7—Burnt Fort—Our take out site is believed to be one of the possible sites of a circa 1750s settlement called New Hanover on the Satilla River established by an Indian trader and Quaker from Virginia named Edmund Gray. Gray, who was elected a representative and later expelled from Georgia’s colonial assembly, was undoubtedly one of the “characters” of his day. Historic accounts provide conflicting reports of the man describing him as collectively a testostering Quaker, a “political adventurer,” a “radical dreamer” and a reaper who provided many of the “pioneers” of Georgia’s colonial government. After dismissal from the colonial assembly in 1755, he led a group of mostly landless families into the frontier along the Satilla River in the “no man’s land” between British-controlled Georgia and Spanish-controlled Florida. There he and others set up trade with Spain and local Indians. Though lucrative for what became known as “Gray’s Gang,” the Spanish trade in neighboring Florida was frowned upon by Georgia’s colonial government. Eventually, most in New Hanover withdrew to a settlement on Cumberland Island and then scattered to land around to the St. Mary’s River. It is believed that Gray’s Gang built a fort on this site that was used as refuge by settlers during Indian uprisings and ultimately set ablaze by Indians in the early 1800s, giving rise to the name “Burnt Fort.” By the 1840s new migrants settled here, setting up a sawmill that processed logs harvested far upstream and then floated down the Satilla to this point. Locals interviewed for Alex McQueen’s 1932 book History of Charlton County recalled times when the river was so full of logs that it was possible to walk two miles up river from Burnt Fort on “raft after raft of some the largest yellow pine logs ever grown in Georgia.” A ferry also operated at this location until 1928. The circa-1956 bridge that still spans the river here was named to honor Alva J. Hopkins, a long-time legislator from Charlton County who was instrumental in the construction of Ga. 252 and died in 1961.