

Beaverdale Boogie— Paddle Georgia 2016

June 18—Conasauga River

Distance: 16 miles

Starting Elevation: 705 feet **Lat:** 34.9209°N **Lon:** -84.8416°W

Ending Elevation: 697 feet **Lat:** 34.7922 **Lon:** -84.8573°W

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Ga. 2
Mile 8.5	Norton Bridge Road
Mile 16	Private Take Out

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Beaverdale—The Beaverdale Superette, operated for the past 36 years by the Queen family, serves as our first launch site. The community of Beaverdale borrows its name from North America’s largest rodent and one of the keystone species for clean water. Though a nuisance for many landowners, beavers help keep our rivers and streams clean by creating wetlands that capture sediment and other pollutants. The humble beaver became Canada’s national animal; in the U.S., of course, we chose the bald eagle. A review of U.S. place names suggests that beavers influenced our history as much as eagles. Between 1880 and 2013, there were 43 U.S. post offices using the name Beaver...the exact number of Eagle post offices during the same period.

Mile 1.6—River of Grass—Along the sandbars here is water willow, a common native aquatic plant that is abundant on the Conasauga as well as many other Georgia rivers. It’s identified by its long, slender willow-like leaves and its white orchid-like blooms streaked with purple. The abundance of water willow here lends credence to one of the meanings that has been prescribed to the Native American name, Conasauga, a derivative of the Cherokee word kahnasagah, meaning “grass.” However, chroniclers of Hernando de Soto’s travels noted his visit to the Native American village of “Canasagua” in 1540, a time that predates the Cherokee. Other historic accounts suggest that Conasauga means “sparkling waters” or “strong horse.” Maps created in the early 1800s, identify it as both the Conasauga and Slave River, the later a reference to the many slaves who poled flatboats down the river.

Mile 3—Drainage Districts—On river right here is a slough that was once the main channel of the river. Turn your boat upstream to view the course you’ve just paddled, you’ll notice that the last 0.3 mile runs in an unnaturally straight line. This man-made channel traces its origins to 1911 when the Georgia General Assembly adopted legislation creating local “drainage districts.” The districts were charged to “locate and establish levees, drains or canals and cause to be constructed, straightened, widened or deepened any ditch, drain or water course...for the purpose of draining and reclaiming wet, swamp or overflowed lands.” The legislature declared that “the drainage of surface water from agricultural lands...shall be considered a public benefit and conducive to the public health, convenience, utility and welfare.” Thus began a decades-long effort to mitigate the impacts of a century of intensive farming and soil erosion. During the 1800s, soil from the area’s farms literally filled the river channel, limiting its carrying capacity and causing the river to overflow its banks, rendering fertile farmland useless. In 1917 the Georgia Geological Survey identified 45 miles of the Conasauga and some 4500 acres along its shores as needing drainage. The solution was to dredge and straighten the river channel. The channelization here took place between 1930 and 1960. Pre-1943 maps show a sweeping s-shaped bend to the northwest here while circa 1970 maps show the new—and straight—channel. Modern soil management (including the introduction of kudzu) likely did more to restore the Conasauga’s ability to carry floodwater. With the flow of sediment into the channel stemmed, overtime, the river moved accumulated sediment down stream and achieved equilibrium.

Mile 3.3—Bridge—This derelict bridge is flanked by rich bottomlands usually filled with corn. During the early winter this river section’s most notable feature is corn stalks...stuck in trees, piled against strainers, covering sandbars. When the winter rains come and the water rises, the fallow from riverside fields fills the river. It has been this way for generations. In the mid-1800s, Euclid Waterhouse, who farmed much of the land here, got his corn crop to market similarly. He waited for rain to raise the river, loaded his corn on barges and floated them down river to Rome. Waterhouse is notable in Murray County history as a local delegate to the Georgia Secession Convention that preceded the Civil War. Though a slave owner, Waterhouse opposed the rebellion. When delegates voted to secede by a 208-89 vote, Waterhouse returned to his farm, granted freedom to his slaves and moved to New York.

Mile 6.1—Pump-Storage Reservoir—The water intake on river right here fills a Dalton Utilities pump-storage reservoir that holds 1.2 billion gallons of water. The facility serves to provide dependable flows for the utility’s main drinking water intake some 10 miles downstream. During periods of high flows, water is pumped from the river, stored and then returned during periods of low flows. Since the 1980s, such facilities have become the go-to method for increasing water supplies in lieu of building larger, more expensive and more environmentally damaging dams on the main stem of large rivers. In fact, until the 1980s, the Conasauga was targeted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a dam near the mouth of Holly Creek. The “Dalton Reservoir” was to be a 8,640-acre water body that would provide “water supply, water quality control, flood control...and recreational opportunities” for the area. It was one of the first projects to be subjected to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 that required federal agencies to conduct environmental studies to determine the impacts of their proposed projects. In this case, the NEPA review revealed the inadequacies of the project. The Corps wrote in its 1972 Environmental Statement: “The proposed project will provide an immediate and long term improvement in satisfying the human needs resulting from increased affluence and leisure time that accompanies industrial and economic growth.” In noting “adverse impacts” to the riverine fishery, the agency wrote: “The stream fishery losses would be replaced with much greater opportunities for fishing of a lake type nature.” The report went on to state that a June 1968 public hearing was held in Dalton and attended by 160 people. “Although opposed by a few individual land owners, no organized group voiced objection to the project,” concluded the Corps. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, however, did voice opposition. The proposal languished and was shelved, leading to this less environmentally-damaging solution to Dalton’s water supply needs and likely saving taxpayers millions—not to mention preserving a free-flowing river with a host of rare fish and mussels.

Mile 10—Prater Island—On river right a logjam marks the head of Prater Island, an island that extends down river 2.3 miles. Downstream of Ga. 286 a portion of the island is part of the Conasauga River Wildlife Management Area which encompasses 338 acres of land, including two parcels along the east bank of the river downstream of Norton Bridge. The island bears the name of the Prater family, who established a mill on nearby Cohulla Creek in 1855 that still stands and hosts an annual country fair.

Mile 12.8—Old Mitchell Bridge—This circa 1920 single-lane concrete bridge was in operation until 2001. It was replaced by the Jimmy Witherow Bridge a half mile upstream. Witherow, a Murray County native, was a long-time educator and civic leader, serving as Murray County schools superintendent and chairman of the county board of commissioners.

Mile 14.4—Old Chattanooga Ford & James Monroe—Near this spot on May 26, 1819, President James Monroe crossed the river during a four-month journey through the southeast to get a first hand view of conditions in Indian territory. Monroe’s journey began just a month after the passage of the Indian Civilization Act, a measure that Monroe hoped would prevent the destruction of the tribes by teaching them “in the mode of agriculture suited to their situation” along with reading, writing and math. Like many of his time, Monroe believed Native Americans could be assimilated to U.S. culture and economic system, yet he also believed that the tribes’ claims to vast territories were invalid, saying, “The earth was given to mankind to support the greatest number of which it is capable. No tribe or people have a right to withhold from the wants of others more than is necessary for their own support and comfort.” During Monroe’s presidency (1817-1825), the U.S. signed 40 treaties with Indian nations, 23 of which involved land acquisition. Originally a proponent of voluntary removal, Monroe reluctantly embraced what is now recognized as the inequitable and destructive process of forced removal. Before leaving office, he told Congress: “Experience has clearly demonstrated that, in their present state, it is impossible to incorporate them in such masses, in any form whatever, into our system. Their degradation and extermination will be inevitable.”