

The Tilton Twerk–Paddle Georgia 2016

June 20—Conasauga River

Distance: 10 miles

Starting Elevation: 677 feet **Lat:** 34.7141°N **Lon:** -84.9304°W

Ending Elevation: 661 feet **Lat:** 34.6655°N **Lon:** -84.9384°W

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0 Private Take Out

Mile 10 Tilton Road Bridge Take Out (Private)

Points of Interest:

Mile 1.1—Mason Farm at River’s Edge—The large building on river right here marks the site of this event and wedding venue that boasts of a two-story, 8,900-square foot barn and a 3,700 square-foot covered patio all overlooking the river and nestled on a 77-acre cattle farm. Venues like Mason Farm have become increasingly popular as brides have opted for “rustic chic” weddings, but recently, wedding planning professionals growing tired of burlap table covers and mason jar wine glasses have predicted the trend may be on the way out. Said one in a recent online article: “I’m going to start throwing mason jars at brides.”

Mile 2.3—Loopers Bend Land Application System and PFOAs—From Looper’s Bend Bridge downstream more than five miles on river left is Dalton Utilities’ 9,800-acre sewage land application system. Partially treated wastewater is sprayed on fields and forests where it filters into soil and is absorbed by plants to complete the water treatment process. However, the facility has not prevented the entry of fluorinated organic chemicals known as PFOA and PFOS into the Conasauga River. These chemicals, which were once used to make stain resistant carpets in Dalton (as well as clothing, furniture, paper packaging and non-stick cookware), were withdrawn from use by carpet manufacturers in 2001 when they were linked to health risks including cancer, liver, thyroid and immune system impacts as well as developmental effects in fetuses and breast fed infants. Unfortunately, these chemicals are persistent in the environment, and in fact, scientists have found them in the blood of nearly all the people they have tested, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In May, EPA issued new health advisories for these chemicals and recommended water users withdrawing from contaminated sources take steps to limit exposure. The City of Rome, the first municipal water user downstream from Dalton, promptly switched its primary water intake to the Etowah River. Combined PFOA and PFOS levels in the Oostanaula River at Rome in April were measured at 111 parts per trillion (PPT), above the EPA advisory safe limit of 70 PPT. Levels on the Etowah, by comparison, measured 36 PPT. PFOAs and PFOS are not the only toxic legacy in the upper Coosa River basin. Fish consumption advisories are in place for virtually all streams in the area due to the presence of another cancer-causing chemical, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). PCBs were used to manufacture electric transformers at the General Electric plant in Rome and made their way into streams and rivers, polluting food sources for fish and wildlife. Though use of PCBs ceased in 1976, the chemicals are slow to breakdown in the environment and continue to persist in the aquatic food chain.

Mile 6—Shoal & the Voyage of the Tennessee Patriot—This small shoal is typical of the Conasauga’s natural shoals. Keep in mind this shallow run as you consider the following story: In 1821, a 50-foot-long, 6-foot-wide boat with a draft of six feet known as the Tennessee Patriot made an epic journey from the Clinch River near Kingston, Tennessee to Montgomery, Alabama. The boat floated down river on the Clinch and Tennessee, then poled up the Hiwassee to the Ocoee River near the Georgia-Tennessee state line. From there, the boat and its cargo were hauled about 10 miles overland to the Conasauga River where it continued its journey to the Oostanaula and Coosa rivers, arriving in Montgomery with a load of flour and whiskey. This was not the only vessel to make this journey; boatyards on the Ocoee and Conasauga at either end of the overland portage route catered to these intrepid river travelers. This eastern inland waterway/portage route was of significance to Native Americans and even into the late 1800s, various proposals were floated to construct a canal linking the Tennessee and Coosa river systems in north Georgia. Such a project would have created a commercial navigation system ranging some 1200 miles from northeast Tennessee to the Gulf of Mexico. Shipping goods on railroads, it turned out, was cheaper and more reliable.

Mile 9—Conasauga Shale & Fracking—As you have seen already, bluffs along the Conasauga are common, showing off the limestone and shale that underlies much of the valleys of northwest Georgia’s ridge and valley region. Thousands of feet beneath this exposed rock is a shale formation that runs from central Alabama into Tennessee, basically paralleling the Oostanaula and Conasauga rivers through northwest Georgia. The Conasauga Shale formation, presumably rich in natural gas, has attracted the attention of oil and natural gas exploration companies who believe that new hydraulic fracturing (fracking) techniques could help them extract some of the 625 trillion cubic feet of natural gas believed to be held in the Conasauga formation. In other locales, fracking has caused pollution of well water and surface water, caused sinkholes and even increased frequency of earthquakes. In recent years, energy companies have purchased mineral rights leases from local property owners and even drilled some test wells, though to date, no producing wells have been established. With gas prices low, it is unlikely anyone would take a chance on an unproven play, but should prices rise, the likelihood of gas exploration in the region increases. Unfortunately, Georgia’s oil and natural gas drilling laws that were adopted in 1975 long before modern drilling techniques were developed are woefully inadequate to protect northwest Georgia’s rural communities. Under current law, an energy company could apply for and receive permission to drill in just 15 days with no requirement to notify adjacent property owners or the public at large. In fact, Georgia doesn’t even have a mechanism in place for taxing natural gas extraction, a revenue stream that is common in oil and gas producing states. The Coosa River Basin Initiative is working with Georgia River Network and Southern Environmental Law Center as well as local legislators to introduce legislation in the 2017 Georgia General Assembly session to update and improve the state’s laws regulating oil and natural gas exploration. Meanwhile, many local governments are reviewing their ordinances to determine what protections are in place and what could be done to better protect their citizens and the region’s well water and its rivers and streams.

Mile 9.8—Battle of Tilton—After the surrender of Atlanta during the Civil War, the Confederate Army, rather than pursuing the Union Army as it marched toward Savannah and the Georgia coast, turned north in hopes of disrupting supplies lines for their adversaries. One of their main targets was the Western & Atlantic Railroad that ran just west of the river here. On Oct. 13, 1864, a superior force of Confederates surrounded about 300 Union soldiers guarding the railroad bridge over Swamp Creek. Some 70 of the Union soldiers took shelter in a blockhouse constructed for the defense of the railroad while another 200 spread out in trenches around the blockhouse. Confederate Gen. Alexander Stewart asked for their surrender, but Lt. Col. Samuel M. Archer refused, sending a note back to the enemy that read: “If you want me and my men come and take us.” Gen. Stewart responded by directing the fire of 11 cannons at the blockhouse; within seven hours the battle was over and 244 Union soldiers were captured. Many were taken south to Rome, and only a week later, two soldiers attempted an escape that involved a swim across the Coosa River. One safely returned to the Union lines; the other, a Capt. S.E. Hicks drowned. The Confederate victory at Tilton, however, did little to slow “Sherman’s March to the Sea.” Savannah fell on Dec. 21. It appears that many of the soldiers stationed along the Conasauga during this portion of the war were not impressed with the environs. A letter from a Union soldier published in a Clearfield, Pennsylvania newspaper during this time period gives insight into the visitors’ impressions of the South: “The majority of the people seem to be living in ignorance...The houses are nearly all only one story, built of hewn logs with either boards or clapboards nailed over the space on the inside without either being chinked or daubed. Very few houses have windows...The country is well watered but the citizens do not seem to use much of it...They live in the roughest kind of backwoods style...On the morning of the 17th, I found 17 boxes of tobacco...secreted in the woods close to our camp near the Conasauga River. It was soon distributed through the Divisions...The boxes were marked I. H. Atlas, Dalton, Georgia.”