

# Macon Moonwalk—Paddle Georgia 2018

June 22—Ocmulgee River

**Distance:** 11.8 miles

**Starting Elevation:** 334 feet **Lat:** 32.993778°N, **Lon:** -83.724753°W

**Ending Elevation:** 288 feet **Lat:** 32.869036°N, **Lon:** -83.654403°W

**Restroom Facilities:**

<b>Mile 0</b>	<b>Pope's Ferry Landing</b>
<b>Mile 9</b>	<b>Macon Water Authority</b>
<b>Mile 11.8</b>	<b>Amerson Park</b>

## **Points of Interest:**

**Mile 0—Pope's Ferry & Ocmulgee River Water Trail**—In 1819, Cullen Pope began operating a ferry at this site. While in the 1800s this ferry was an important link to Creek Indian lands west of the Ocmulgee, today the boat ramp is a critical link in the Ocmulgee River Water Trail (ORWT), an ongoing effort to create a boating trail stretching some 250 miles from Lloyd Shoals Dam to the Altamaha River. Monroe County owns 13 acres surrounding the boat ramp and though it currently is in a state of disrepair, the county ultimately plans to develop the property to cater to river users. Already, local boaters and outfitters use the site regularly as a launch for trips downstream to Amerson Park. The ORWT Partnership now consists of representatives from multiple counties, all working to improve access and promote recreational use of the river. More information is available at [www.ocmulgeewatertrail.org](http://www.ocmulgeewatertrail.org)

**Mile 1—Tom Shoals & River Cooters**—At this set of shallow shoals, you might encounter Georgia's most common river turtles (and perhaps the most ubiquitous of all the river's creatures). River cooters are readily recognized by their yellow to cream markings on their shells, heads and necks and a somewhat serrated shell edge in the rear. They can reach lengths of almost 17 inches and are commonly seen basking themselves in the sun on the tops of rocks and riverside strainers. They dine on aquatic vegetation and have been used to control invasive water hyacinth. Despite their apparent abundance, these and other Georgia turtles face threats, primarily overharvesting for export to Asian countries where the appetite for turtles, served in soups and stews, is immense. As stocks of wild turtles have declined in Asia, those countries have turned to the U.S., and particularly the Southeast for new supplies. In 2012, the Center for Biological Diversity reported that exports of wild-caught U.S. turtles exceeded 2 million. In 2010, the Georgia General Assembly directed the Department of Natural Resources to create regulations to prevent the overharvesting of river cooters and other species. Those regulations went into effect in 2012. The word "cooter" was introduced to the American South by slaves. In Africa "kuta" is the word for turtle in some languages.

**Mile 3.5—Norfolk-Southern Railroad**—This is one of the many spots at which you will be able to hear or see this railroad from the river. This line was originally constructed in 1882 as part of the East Tennessee & Georgia Railroad, a 158-route connecting from Macon to Atlanta to Rome and on to points north. In 1886, the 88-mile ride from Macon to Atlanta took four hours. The first railroad in these parts ran further west, on a 26-mile route from Macon to Forsyth, opening on Dec. 10, 1838. The first locomotive to run the tracks was appropriately named the "Ocmulgee." To get the locomotive to the tracks, it was first unloaded from a sea-going vessel at the port in Darien on the Altamaha River, transferred to a river steamer, and then shipped up the Altamaha and Ocmulgee rivers to Macon. Of course, as the rails became more ubiquitous and proved more dependable than shipping goods on steamboats plying unpredictable rivers, the locomotive would ultimately hasten the end of steamboat navigation on the Ocmulgee.

**Mile 5.6—Awkright Power Plant**—Georgia Power's Awkright Power Plant located on the west bank of the river here was decommissioned in 2002. The 50-year-old coal-fired plant gave way to the larger and more efficient Plant Scherer. It was named for the first president of the Georgia Power Company, Preston Awkright, who in 1906 bought the Atlanta Crackers baseball team and located the team's playing field along one of Atlanta's street car lines in an effort to boost ridership—a ploy that would increase demand for the company's electricity. Almost 70 years later, Atlanta entrepreneur Ted Turner would buy the Atlanta Braves for similar purposes—to increase viewership on his satellite TV channel. Question: Seventy years from now, will the Atlanta Braves and coal-fired power plants like Scherer go the way of the Crackers and Awkright? We won't speculate on the Braves, but Georgia Power has set a goal of eliminating all carbon emissions from its power fleet by 2050. Ten years ago, its coal-burning plants generated nearly 70 percent of the company's portfolio; today less than 30 percent of the company's generation comes from coal.

**Mile 6.4—Macon Canal & Manufacturing Company**—In 1871, local investors formed this company around the grand vision of building a canal from a point on the river near here to Macon. Proponents of the plan envisioned a canal carrying water to the center of the city and generating power to run mills and factories along its banks. The idea for this 10-mile canal persisted into the late 1800s. An August 16, 1890 headline in the *Atlanta Constitution* proclaimed: "Outlook for the Macon Canal Company Very Bright" Readers learned that "the company has been informed by a number of manufacturing enterprises that they will use the canal power of electricity, instead of steam. It is proposed to generate electricity for all kinds of manufactories, printing presses, illuminating uses, etc. ...Macon justly regards the canal project as the largest and move valuable scheme ever suggested or contemplated in this city." Ultimately, the engineering realities likely dissuaded the investors. Construction would have required the excavation of a ridge north of the city. If that wasn't enough, a cemetery also lay in the path of the proposed canal route.

**Mile 6.7—River North Bridge & Ocmulgee River Raft Race**—Imitating the success of the famed Ramblin' Raft Race on the Chattahoochee River in Atlanta, Macon, from 1978 to 1981, hosted its own "Woodstock on Water." The race began at this bridge and wound six miles to Spring Street. At its peak, the event brought more than 3,000 people to the river on some 1,000 boats and rafts, most of the homemade variety. Among the more memorable vessels were a floating Volkswagen Beetle and an inflatable raft in the shape of Air Force One. Proceeds from the event were used for beautification projects in Macon.

**Mile 8.7—Macon Water Authority**—The water intake structure on river left is the site of the day's pit stop (real flush toilets provided by the Macon Water Authority) and a tour of Macon's drinking water treatment facilities. This facility is the direct result of the 1994 natural disaster known as Tropical Storm Alberto which stalled over Central Georgia in early July, forever changing the history of Macon. Massive flooding submerged Macon's Riverside Water Treatment Plant, destroyed over half of the buildings on the site and wrecked a new pumping station which was under construction at the time. Around 50,000 people were left without water for three weeks. The upshot was that federal disaster aid funds led to the construction of Macon's new Amerson Water Treatment Plant and Town Creek Reservoir. Water is drawn from the Ocmulgee during periods of high flows (up to 65 million gallons a day) and stored in the 650-acre, 6.5 billion gallon reservoir where it is then pumped to Macon. The facility is an example of a new-breed of water supply projects called "off-stream" reservoirs. "Off-stream" because a tributary rather than the mainstem of a river is dammed. These projects allow water suppliers to vary the amount of water they withdraw from the river, providing greater protection of river flows. However, they also require the damming and destruction of smaller streams, and cost millions to build. The Amerson Plant checked out at some \$125 million. However, the people of Macon who suffered for three weeks without water in 1994 will tell you it was money well spent. That said, water conservation remains the least expensive means of extending our water supplies and protecting habitat for aquatic wildlife.

**Mile 9.9—Amerson Park**—The launch on river right marks the upper end of Macon's new Amerson Park. It has become a popular launch site for 2-mile tube trips to the park's lower launch.

**Mile 11.6—Porter Pavilion**—This pavilion sitting high above the river is the site of our River's End Celebration and a featured amenity of Amerson Park. Previously, it was the intake structure for Macon's Riverside Water Treatment Plant destroyed by Tropical Storm Alberto flooding. Believe it or not, the towering structure was under water during the flood. During the height of the flood, the city was completely cut off by flood waters which blocked all roads in and out of the city.