

Suwannee Shuffle—Paddle Georgia 2019

June 19—Withlacoochee & Suwannee Rivers

Distance: 10 miles

Starting Elevation: 75 feet

30.46517,-83.22333

Ending Elevation: 70 feet

30.38831,-83.16952

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Timber River Road
Mile 5.2	Morgan Springs
Mile 12	Suwannee River State Park

Points of Interest:

Mile 0.4 Tanner Spring—Located on river left at this sharp bend in the river opposite the sandbar with the “Withlacoochee” sign. While this spring is no match for Madison Blue Springs, it is worth the stop. A second magnitude spring, it pumps more than 40 million gallons a day into the Withlacoochee. The spring pool is about 30 feet in diameter and the vent is some 20 feet below the water’s surface. During the past half century, the region’s springs have been under assault as increasing water withdrawals from the Floridan aquifer and increasing nutrients filtering into the groundwater have significantly altered these natural systems. Between 1950 and 2010, groundwater use from the Floridan in Georgia and Florida has increased from 630 million gallons a day (MGD) to some 3.3 billion gallons a day—a 400 percent increase. Average spring flows in Florida have declined by 32 percent during that same time period, according to studies conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey. Madison Blue Spring, prior to the 1980s, typically contributed 89 million gallons a day to the Withlacoochee. Today, average flows are down to 66 MGD. The declines, coupled with more nutrient-rich water have led to algal blooms within springs, decreased water clarity, loss of native aquatic vegetation and impacts to fauna dependent on the springs. Of course, the loss of spring flows has also impacted the availability of surface water. Tanner and the Withlacoochee’s other springs contribute nearly one fourth of the river’s average flow.

Mile 4.9—Double Doors Spring—This unique spring on river left flows forth from caves in the limestone bank. Look for the two windows in the limestone at the river’s surface.

Mile 5.2—Morgan Springs—The 400-foot-long spring run for this second magnitude spring spills into the Withlacoochee on river left here. It’s possible to wade up the spring run to the spring pool, but the terrain is uneven and strewn with limestone. Perhaps an easier alternative is to take out at our pit stop on river left just downstream and walk to the spring on terra firma. Sitting on private property, the spring is surrounded by an extensive deck, but it is still a beauty to behold. The spring pool is about 70 feet in diameter and is some 20 feet deep. It is a popular spring for cave divers because of its extreme depth with the cave system descending some 200 feet below the water’s surface. Its current owner, Don McAlister should be on hand to answer questions about the property. Be sure to ask Don about his timber mining business on the Suwannee.

Mile 6.2—Sabal Trail Pipeline—Just to the east of this powerline crossing is the Sabal Trail natural gas pipeline, a controversial 517-mile pipeline that brings natural gas extracted through fracking to Florida-based power plants. The pipeline was originally designed to cross the Withlacoochee at this location (within a stone’s throw of three springs), but opposition led to its relocation to the east. It now crosses the Withlacoochee near U.S. 84 in Brooks and Lowndes counties in Georgia. Originally approved by the Federal Energy Regulator Commission (FERC) in 2017, the pipeline is now constructed and in use, but last year a federal court ruled that FERC failed to properly consider the pipeline’s impacts on climate change and halted its use. Since then, pipeline developers Spectra Energy Corp, NextEra, Inc. and FERC convinced the court to allow the pipeline to continue operation while FERC conducts further climate reviews. WWALS Watershed Coalition, Suwannee Riverkeeper and others fought to stop construction of the project based on the potential for catastrophic leaks and/or explosions that could harm the Floridan aquifer. The karst geology of the area is prone to sink holes that could easily undermine the integrity of the underground pipeline. As natural gas has replaced coal as the fuel of choice at power plants, the demand for new gas pipelines has increased, setting off conflicts across the country between landowners, clean energy advocates and pipeline companies. While natural gas is a cleaner fuel than coal (producing 50 to 60 percent less carbon dioxide than coal), the drilling, extraction and transportation of gas in pipelines results in leakage of methane to the atmosphere—a much more harmful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. And, the use of fracking techniques to extract natural gas has led to localized pollution of groundwater in numerous locations.

Mile 6.2—Powerline Spring & Fairy Spring—Two springs are located along this powerline cut. Powerline Spring boils up from the river bottom along the right bank of the river. Just downstream from the powerline on river right is the mouth of Fairy Spring which flows along a delightful run of some 100 feet.

Mile 6.3—Corbett Spring—Located on river left along the river bank opposite the mouth of Fairy Spring.

Mile 7—Melvin Shoals & Timber Rafting—Next to State Line Rapid, this is the largest of the Withlacoochee’s shoals. Rock outcroppings on both banks of the river pinch the flow into a narrow, shoal strewn passage featuring a couple of small ledges. In his 1874 voyage down the Withlacoochee on behalf of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, E. Sherman Gould described the shoal: “Just above Ellaville...is also a formidable reef, some quarter of a mile long, on which I found some two hundred large saw logs hung waiting for a freshet to dislodge them.” In 1874, the land three miles downstream at the confluence of the Withlacoochee and Suwannee was the site of what was Florida’s largest sawmill. Logs were transported to the mill via the river, floated downstream in large rafts.

Mile 9.2—Florida Railway Water Station—On river right here are the remains of a water tank that serviced steam locomotives on the Florida Railway, a line connecting Jacksonville to Tallahassee completed in the 1860s.

Mile 9.8—Suwannee Spring—On river right is the discharge from this second magnitude spring that’s name is a mash up of the two adjacent rivers. This spring is unique in that it is surrounded by a stone structure of unknown purpose. It is believed that the stone structures supported a mill wheel and the flow of the spring was used to turn a grist or saw mill in the 1800s. As noted above, in the late 1800s there was an extensive sawmill operating along the banks of the river here. Its owner, Georgia F. Drews was a Massachusetts native who apprenticed at machine shops in Lowell, Massachusetts when that town was using water power to transform itself into the industrial model for the rest of the country. Given these roots, it seems likely that under Drew’s direction, the consistent flow from this spring was harnessed for some industrial purpose. The spring is also notable as a popular cave diving destination. The spring leads to an extensive underground and underwater passage some 150 feet deep that ultimately connects with Ellaville Spring located downstream on the south bank of the Suwannee below the Florida Railway bridge—a distance of more than 500 feet.

Mile 10—Stephen Foster’s Suwannee River—Here the Withlacoochee meets the fabled Suwannee—fabled largely because of Stephen Foster, a 19th century songwriter who penned the tune *The Old Folks at Home* which included the opening line, “Way down upon the Swannee River.” The tune, written for 1850s minstrel shows in which white performers dressed in black face and imitated black southern dialect in their skits and songs, originally was set on South Carolina’s PeeDee River, but Foster’s brother, Morrison, convinced him he needed a more “mellifluous” sounding southern river. The song includes the line: “Oh, darkeys, how my heart grows weary, far from the old folks at home.” In 1935, Florida adopted the tune as its state song, but by the 1980s, its antebellum lyrics came under criticism. Finally in 2008, state legislators agreed to a compromise in which the historic tune would remain the “state song” (albeit with lyrics changed for modern consumption) while a “state anthem,” *Where the Sawgrass meets the Sky* was also adopted. A Pennsylvania native, Stephen Foster never visited Florida. Foster was, in fact, an abolitionist and music historians contend his lyrics were meant to humanize the South’s slaves. He instructed performers not to mock slaves but to get their audiences to feel compassion for them. Though one of the most successful songwriters of his era, (*Oh Susanna, Old Kentucky Home, Camptown Races*) he never realized any wealth from the success of his music during this era before recordings and radio. He died poor at the age of 37 after falling and cutting his head on a wash basin next to his bed in a New York City hotel.