River. Elected voters recently approved a local option sales tax to fund the construction of the Advent Christian Home and Orphanage.

The Advent Christian faith is one of several large homes that opened during the Civil War as well as the remains of ferry boats once employed in crossing the river here. The land surrounding the confluence of the two rivers in 1842 became the community of Columbus, described by an 1843 visitor as having two large stores and massive piles of cotton awaiting shipment downstream to the coast. Indeed, with shoals just upstream on both the Withlacoochee and Suwannee, this was the head of navigation and thus became an important business center in antebellum Florida. In 1845, the first steamboat arrived at the confluence, the Orpheus, and the first railroad bridge over the river here was completed in 1861. A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers report from the late 1800s shows that the river continued to be critical to the local economy well after the Civil War: “Suwannee River commerce comprises of the movement of freight, farm produce and naval stores from the railroads at Ellaville (previously Columbus)... and the rafting of cedar and other timber to the mills. The roads are few and bad, and bulky produce can only be moved to advantage by water.”

A note on the meaning of Suwannee...historians are unsure of the origins of the name, but suspect that it is a corruption of the name that the Spanish bestowed upon it: Rio San Juan de Guacara after their early explorers established a mission by the same name on the river. Maps from the 1700s show the river’s name as San Juan, but over the years that evolved into Suquana, Sanaway and ultimately, Suwannee. It would not be the only river with a Native American sounding name that actually has Spanish origins. Georgia’s Satilla River is also derived from the name made up from the Yuchi word satalv, or “a river.”

Dowling’s minister, had received a letter from a dying widow pleading for an orphanage that might raise her soon to be orphaned children. Dowling Park Disco

In the faith. That letter inspired Bixler to call upon Dowling, seeking his participation in establishing an orphanage.

In 1913, Dowling Park, Advent Christian Village and Camp Suwannee—our campsite for the final four nights of our journey. Established in 1913, Advent Christian Village is considered Florida’s first retirement community. In 1908 Thomas Dowling established a thriving sawmill here along the banks of the river. Within two years, Dowling Park boasted of several stores, a hotel, a railroad depot, the lumber company’s administrative building, 73 tenant houses for sawmill workers, and several large homes along the river. Meanwhile, Burr Bixler, Dowling’s minister, had received a letter from a dying widow pleading for an orphanage that might raise her soon to be orphaned children in the faith. That letter inspired Bixler to call upon Dowling, seeking his participation in establishing an orphanage.

In 1913, Dowling Park, Advent Christian Village and Camp Suwannee—a site that was once a Native American village and later a center for railroad and telegraph lines and railroad trestles between Tallahassee and Jacksonville was destroyed, including the bridge here. Governmental leaders later blamed the acts of terror on the Democrats who he feared would disrupt communication between state and federal authorities, but others suggest that Drew ordered the bridge destroyed to prevent the arrival of federal marshals who he feared would arrest him in a Republican attempt to maintain control of the state. Drew’s election put an end to Florida’s Reconstruction-era government in which former slaves enjoyed voting rights. Despite Drew’s stated desire to “educate the Negro so that he might vote intelligently and make a good citizen,” Florida’s African-American population would become largely disenfranchised. The outcome of the contested 1876 presidential election in which Rutherford B. Hayes agreed to end Union occupation of the South in exchange for the presidency further sealed the fate of black voting rights in the South. While the state elected its first African American Congressman, Josiah T. Walls during the Reconstruction era, once Democrats gain control of the state, another African American was not elected to Congress until 1992. On river left adjacent to the bridge is Ellaville Spring, a second magnitude spring which spills into the river through a cleft in high limestone bluffs.

Suwannee River Power Plant—On river left is the intake canal for this now closed power plant. Built in the 1950s, the plant needed massive amounts of water for cooling in the coal-fried electric generating system, thus necessitating the construction of this canal as well as a discharge canal just downstream. The plant closed in 2016, and since then owner Duke Energy has begun converting the property for solar power generation. In 2017, it completed a 70-acre solar array that now generates 8.8 megawatts, enough to power about 1,700 homes. Of course, the new power source demands no water withdrawals from the river.

Anderson Spring—The second magnitude spring boils from the river bottom adjacent to the bank on river left. The spring pool is about six feet in diameter and about three feet deep and sits on state land—part of Florida’s Twin Rivers State Forest, some 15,400 acres of preserved land in 15 different tracts along the Withlacoochee and Suwannee rivers. The lands have been purchased with state conservation funds since the 1980s. For the next seven miles from this site, state-owned property abuts the river on both banks or at least on one bank. Look for access points, including some with picnic tables, as you make your way down river.

Quarry Lake—On river right here is a slough leading to extensive wetlands along Bethel Creek, depressions created during the historic mining of limestone here. Water level dependent, these wetlands may be accessible by boat. The slough leading to the wetlands is locally known as “Alligator Alley” for what may prove to be obvious reasons.

Dowling Park & Advent Christian Village—On river left is the dock leading to Dowling Park, Advent Christian Village and Camp Suwannee—our campsite for the final four nights of our journey. Established in 1913, Advent Christian Village is considered Florida’s first retirement community. In 1908 Thomas Dowling established a thriving sawmill here along the banks of the river. Within two years, Dowling Park boasted of several stores, a hotel, a railroad depot, the lumber company’s administrative building, 73 tenant houses for sawmill workers, and several large homes along the river. Meanwhile, Burr Bixler, Dowling’s minister, had received a letter from a dying widow pleading for an orphanage that might raise her soon to be orphaned children in the faith. That letter inspired Bixler to call upon Dowling, seeking his patronage for a children’s home, as well as a facility that could take in “worn out” Advent Christian teachers and their wives. By 1914, the Advent Christian Home and Orphanage was hosting at least five orphans and its first retired preachers. Today, in addition to hosting youth camps at Camp Suwannee, the Village is a full-service retirement community providing everything from independent living to full nursing care. The Advent Christian faith is a relatively small Protestant denomination founded in 1860 with more than 200 churches and some 28,000 members in the U.S. and 13 countries abroad. It is the river right is the Dowling Park River Campsite. One of this 171-mile water trail that serves as a model for water trail development in Georgia. Unlike Georgia where there is no state government-sponsored water trail system, Florida has an extensive system of taxpayer-supported trails with online guide resources, developed launch sites and campsites and more. With its five, over-the-top “river camps,” the Suwannee Trail is the crown jewel of Florida’s system. The camps feature screened sleeping pavilions with electricity and ceiling fans, restrooms with flush toilets and potable water and covered picnic-dining areas. Georgia River Network is leading the effort to establish Georgia’s water trail system and is working with local, state, federal and non-governmental partners to improve access to the state’s rivers. For example, in northwest Georgia, Rome/Floyd County voters recently approved a local option sales tax that includes funds for building at least one campsite like this one on the Etowah River.