

# Dowling Park Disco-Paddle Georgia 2019

June 20—Suwannee River

**Distance:** 15 miles

**Starting Elevation:** 70 feet

30.38831,-83.16952

**Ending Elevation:** 65 feet

30.24496,-83.24954

**Restroom Facilities:**

**Mile 0** Suwannee River State Park  
**Mile 8.5** Twin Rivers State Forest  
**Mile 15** Dowling Park Boat Ramp

**Points of Interest:**

**Mile 0—Suwannee River State Park**—Our launch site for the day sits within Suwannee River State Park. A short walk downstream along the Suwannee River Trail and the Earthworks Trail leads to an overlook at the confluence of the Withlacoochee and Suwannee that also offers views of Confederate earthworks built to defend the railroad bridge 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 tiber 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 Jaun, but over the years that evolved into Suquana, Sawaney 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 said to be derived from the name Spaniards bestowed upon the river: Saint Illa.

**Mile 0.3—Ellaville & George F. Drew**—Here the CSX railroad crosses the river at virtually the same location that the original Florida Railway spanned the river in 1861. That bridge, a wooden and covered variety, was kept in service during those days by attendants who rushed into the bridge after the passing of each steam locomotive to douse any embers issued forth from the engine’s smokestack during passage, lest the whole span go up in flames. Ultimately, however, the bridge did meet its end by fire in a matter of curious political intrigue during Florida’s gubernatorial election of 1876. That election pitted Democrat Ellaville sawmill owner George F. Drew against Republican incumbent Marcellus Stearns. The election was marked by the Democrats intimidating black voters at the local level and fraud by Republicans at the state level. The election for both the governor’s office and the U.S. presidency was so close in Florida (less than 200 votes separated the gubernatorial candidates) that a prolonged court battle ensued, not unlike the presidential election of 2000. Drew wasn’t officially announced the winner until January 1877. On election day in November 1876, telegraph lines and railroad trestles between Tallahassee and Jacksonville were destroyed, including the bridge here. Gov. Stearns later blamed the acts of terror on the Democrats who he said sought to 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.

**Mile 1—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-fired 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 1700 homes. Of course, the new power source demands no water withdrawals from the river.

**Mile 3.3—Anderson Spring**—This 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 one bank. Look for access points, including some with picnic tables, as you make your way down river.

**Mile 13.2—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.

**Mile 14.3—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 preachers 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.

**Mile 14.6—Suwannee River Wilderness Trail**—On river right is the Dowling Park River Camp, part 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 state, local 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.