

# Troupville Trot–Paddle Georgia 2019

June 15—Withlacoochee River

**Distance:** 11 miles

**Starting Elevation:** 102 feet

30.85208,-83.34713

**Ending Elevation:** 92 feet

30.78965,-83.45163

## **Restroom Facilities:**

**Mile 0** Troupville Boat Landing  
**Mile 7.2** Langdale Property  
**Mile 11.2** Spook Bridge

## **Points of Interest:**

**Mile 0 Little River**—Surprise! Our journey does not begin on the Withlacoochee! Instead the first 1700 feet of our journey is actually on the Little River, which, ironically, is bigger than the Withlacoochee River. With its headwaters some 100 miles upstream in Turner County, it was described in 1889 by humorist Montgomery M. Folsom as the Ockolocoochee River or Little River. Folsom noted the disparity between the Little and the Withlacoochee and the seeming unfairness that the larger river gave up its name to the smaller: “It is like the wedding of a great big strapping wiregrass girl with a short, stout, presumptive little man,” he wrote.

**Mile 0.2 Withlacoochee River & Troupville**—Here the diminutive Withlacoochee swallows the Little, if not in volume, at least in name. The confluence of the two rivers was from 1833 to 1860 the site of Troupville, the seat of government for Lowndes County. It was a busy community of about 20 families with courthouse and jail, hotels, four stores, a pair of churches, a tavern and even a bowling alley. According to a 1932 account of Troupville by James Nicholas Talley, when court was in session the town became a beehive of activity: “Court Week always attracted a great concourse of people. Some attended from necessity or compulsion, some to enjoy the feast of erudition and eloquence; others to trade, traffic or electioneer, but to many it was an occasion for much drinking and horse swapping, and for indulgence in cock fighting, horse racing, and other “worldly amusements” for which Troupville became somewhat notorious. Indeed, among the Godly, it was regarded as a wild town – almost as wicked as Hawkinsville.” The property is currently owned by former Georgia Trust for Public Land Director Helen Tapp who wants to see the property permanently preserved. Troupville was abandoned and passed into history largely because of the very reason for its founding at this location—the rivers. The town’s original promoters hoped that “river improvements” could render the Withlacoochee navigable, but those improvements were never forthcoming and the river was particularly uncooperative. Frequent floods, illnesses doubtless brought on by mosquitoes infesting the lowlands and the establishment of the railroad four miles to the east finally doomed Troupville. In abandoning the town, however, residents did not abandon their homes. Most were moved to Valdosta and some survived well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among the land’s most famous visitors was John Henry Holiday, “Doc” Holiday of Gunfight at the O.K. Corral fame. Holiday lived as a young man in Valdosta. Legend holds that Holiday frequented a swimming hole on the Withlacoochee and around 1870 was involved in an altercation when he found occupying Union soldiers dipping in his favorite hole. Holiday drew his gun and fired at the men, killing two of them, precipitating his departure from Valdosta and eventual travels west and into infamy. Local researchers, however, contend that no evidence exists to confirm the deaths of the soldiers at the river. The town was named for George Troup, Georgia’s governor from 1823-1827, and Valdosta, which supplanted Troupville as county seat, borrows its name from Troup’s Laurens County plantation.

**Mile 1.6—Valdosta Water Pollution Control Plant**—On river left here is the discharge from Valdosta’s sewage treatment plant which began operation in 2016. Like many municipalities, Valdosta has struggled to maintain and expand its sewer infrastructure. As a result –despite the relatively new treatment facility, the city has been plagued by chronic sewage overflows, especially during periods of rain when stormwater infiltrates into sewer lines. When heavy rain beset the area in December 2018, more than 6 million gallons of untreated sewage was released from the city’s sewer system. The sewage overflow problems have drawn the ire of downstream neighbors in Florida who have organized a task force to pressure Valdosta to invest in upgrading its sewage system. Fecal bacteria levels on the river rise during these spill events, making the river unhealthy for swimming; this section of river is listed on Georgia’s “polluted streams” list due to high bacteria levels.

**Mile 4—Spring Branch**—This clear, cold, sandy-bottomed stream entering on river left seems appropriately named. The creek drains portions of Kinderloo Forest, a sprawling residential golf community.

**Mile 7.1—Langdale Company Pit Stop**—On river left here is our pit stop provided with cooperation from The Langdale Company, a major landowner and business leader in South Georgia. The Langdale story begins in the late 1800s when John Wesley Langdale began purchasing land in the area intent on tapping the sap of pines that was then distilled into rosin and turpentine. He also harvested the vast acres of virgin pines. Valdosta soon became one of the centers of the naval stores industry (lumber, turpentine and rosin) and for most of the period from 1890 until the 1960s, Georgia was the national leader in naval stores production. By 1937, the Langdale Company was tapping nearly three million trees and operating 25 turpentine camps and stills. John Wesley’s grandson, Harley Langdale, Jr. would be raised in the industry but attended and graduated from the University of Georgia’s school of forestry in 1937, bringing back to his hometown scientific forest management practices. All along, the company continued to purchase land. This pit stop sits on 3,000 acres. In fact, the company owns the river front in Lowndes County for the next 10 miles. Today, the Langdale Company has expanded beyond its roots to encompass some 26 subsidiary companies including auto dealerships, a hotel, commercial banks, and the aforementioned Kinderloo Forest golf and residential development along Spring Branch. The company boasts of having planted more trees than it has harvested. In 2009, they marked the planting of their 100 millionth seedling.

**Mile 11—Atlantic & Gulf Railroad**—A railroad bridge has spanned the river here since 1860. From the late 1850s through 1860, some 1200 slaves working for the Savannah, Albany & Gulf Railroad and the Brunswick & Florida Railroad toiled through the wetlands of south Georgia to complete this 100-mile road from the Georgia coast. In 1870 when the route was finally completed, the express train blew across this bridge daily at about two in the morning on its nearly 14-hour journey from Savannah to Bainbridge.

**Mile 11.2—Spook Bridge**—The abandoned circa-1920 open spandrel concrete bridge here is a picturesque, though heavily graffitied landmark that is steeped in legend, so much so that in 2017 a Valdosta-based movie production company turned those bridge “mysteries” into a feature length horror flick titled *Spook Bridge*. After U.S. 84 bridge was completed upstream around 1950, this span was abandoned and soon attracted the expected crowd of loiterers and rabble rousers. Fanciful tales of tragedies and subsequent hauntings have persisted since (a murder/suicide, two young lovers whose car plunged into the river killing both, a school bus that went off the bridge taking the lives of children). None of these stories have any basis in fact. But, the location does have a long history as a gathering place thanks to Blue Springs located along the river’s west bank. Two springs once attracted people to this spot. The first flowed into the river along its western bank; the second formed a 30-foot diameter pool beyond the river bank and flowed along a spring run into the river. From the later half of the 1800s through the mid 1900s, these springs were widely known. In 1876, the *Quitman Reporter* noted: “The Blue Spring on the Withlacoochee is fast becoming a popular place of resort for those who are fond of rustication and feel the need of respite from business and domestic cares.” By the 1920s, Blue Springs was a full-fledged resort with train depot, hotel and cottages. In 1925, the Atlanta Constitution reported the sale of “Quitman’s famous bathing and summer resort” for more than \$25,000. By 1929, however, the Blue Springs Company was fighting with the Georgia Highway Board for the life of their namesake spring. At the time the state was “extending” the bridge on the western side of the river, with fill work disrupting the Blue Springs property. Lawsuits brought by Blue Springs initially halted construction, but ultimately the courts agreed to let the state proceed. Today, the abandoned road does, indeed, cut through two large pools of stagnant water some 400 feet west of the river, and Blue Spring—which once flowed at a rate of some 12 million gallons a day--no longer provides a recognizable flow.