

Okefenokee—St. Marys River Adventure Day 2

Total Distance: 5.7 miles

Launch Site: Trader's Hill Boat Landing 30.783260, -82.023983 Take Out: Scott's Landing 30.784068, -81.970046

Points of Interest

Mile 0—Trader's Hill—Our campsite and the river landing associated with it are rich in cultural history as the spot was considered the head of navigation on the St. Marys River. It's location on the border between Spanish America and the British colony of Georgia has further infused its history. By 1755, the spot was a trading center at which English, Spaniards and American Indians exchanged goods, and it gains mention in the botanist William Bartram's journals from 1791. By the early 1800s, Traders Hill was a well-established community with a river landing, general store, meeting house, saloon and jail. Being on the edge of the frontier subjected its residents and those nearby to attacks from hostile Native Americans, necessitating the construction of a frontier fort around 1812. In 1854, the community became the seat of government for newly formed Charlton County—a designation it held until 1901 when commerce shifted from the river to railroads and Folkston replaced it. In the 1840s, the community executed a Native American by the name of Suanee who was accused of stealing from and then murdering a local merchant. His final words before execution were reportedly: "May the curse of my father's spirit and mine be placed among the people as long as there is a Trader's Hill." Sometime afterward, the residents of Trader's Hill were spooked one night when a bright light emanated from the hanging tree accompanied by a low moan. This, the *Charlton County Herald* reported, led to many residents abandoning the place. In 1874 during a 2,500-mile canoe journey along the Atlantic coast, the intrepid explorer Nathaniel H. Bishop passed Trader's Hill during a foray down the St. Marys. At this time, harvest of the region's vast stands of long-leaf pines was in full swing—an activity that temporarily halted his journey downstream. In his travelogue, *Voyage of the Paper Canoe*, he wrote: "Rafts and logs blocked the river as I approached the settlement of Trader's Hill, and upon a most insecure footing the canoe was dragged over a quarter mile of logs and put into the water on the lower side of the "jam." Crossing several of these log "jams," which covered the entire width of the St. Marys, I became weary of the task...when suddenly the voices of men in the woods were heard. Soon a gentleman, with two raftsmen, appeared and kindly greeted me...The two stalwart lumbermen lifted the boat as though she were a feather, and carried her, jumping from log to log, the whole length of the raft. They then put her gently in the water." Said one of the strange vessel of wood and paper: "She's the dog-gondest thing I ever seed and jist as putty as a new coffin!"

Mile 1—Spanish Creek—At proper water levels, this creek is well worth the exploration. In the early 1800s, a short distance upstream was the site of Archibald Clark's sawmill which, according to some accounts, was the target of a British Marine raid conducted in Feb. 1815, some two months after the signing of the Treaty of Ghent which ended the British-American conflict known as the War of 1812. In this unnecessary expedition, some 52 British soldiers plied up river and were met from both sides of the river with rifle volleys from well hidden Americans. The defenders reportedly fired and then stole further up river to attack again at the next advantageous bend. In the end, the eight British boats were turned back, returning down river to the town of St. Marys with 29 dead or wounded men. The defenders lost only two soldiers. Thus, the sawmill on Spanish Creek survived the war.

Mile 2.7—Waycross Shortline Railroad—A railroad has spanned the river here since 1881 when Henry B. Plant completed the line running from Waycross to Jacksonville. It remains in service today as part of the CSX system and carries 40 to 45 trains a day. This high-volume line has earned the nickname the Folkston Funnel because virtually all of CSX's Florida bound trains from the Midwest and Northeast use this route. Folkston has capitalized on this by building a "Railfan Platform" where rail enthusiasts can train watch. At the "end of the line" in Waycross the railroad remains a big economic driver; the city is home to the largest rail yard in the Southeast. A slough extends off the main channel here nearly a quarter mile and is worthy of exploration. The bridge itself dates to 1909; just downstream the brick pillars of the original 1881 bridge remain, one of which supports a riverfront home.

Mile 3.2—Slough—Located on river left, this little slough is worth a look.

Mile 3.6—Black River Landing—On river left here is a boat ramp and extensive dock associated with this gated community.

Mile 4.4—U.S. 1 Bridge—Dating to 1957, the twin bridges here were once a primary tourist route into Florida from the north and midwest. Visitors entering Florida could stop at the state visitors' center for a cup of free orange juice and stay in one of several hotels lined up on either side of U.S. 1. When I-95 was completed to the east, the importance of U.S. 1 as a tourist route declined. Today, the welcome center and the hotels are long since gone.

Mile 4.7—Riverside Homes and the Cross Florida Canal—On river right here is a small neighborhood of homes. These 21st century signs of humankind's presence on the St. Marys pale in comparison to the impacts dreamed up by engineers in the 1800s. Interested in a cross-Florida canal, Congress authorized the first surveys for such a project in 1826 and for the next 150 years the dream of a cross-Florida canal persisted. The first route proposed in 1929 ran up the St. Marys and across the Okefenokee Swamp...though the surveyors never really explored the swamp. Interest peaked in the Reconstruction era as northern capitalists sought investment opportunities in the South. In 1870, the Georgia legislature authorized the formation of the "Okefenokee and St. Marys Canal and Drainage Company," giving the private company the rights to "thoroughly drain said swamp" and to "select and take, buy, hold or receive as a donation" any lands necessary for constructing the canal. These and other subsequent corporations authorized by the General Assembly all failed to bear navigational fruit. But, efforts to build an Atlantic to Gulf canal persisted into the 1970s. By that time about 28 miles of a proposed 107-mile route had been built further south in Florida. Construction was ultimately halted over environmental concerns. Taxpayers dropped \$74 million on the long-dreamed of, but ill-fated project.

