

# Paddle Georgia 2021 Ogeechee River Adventure

## March 13-14

**Distance:** 15 miles

**Starting Elevation:** 23 feet **Lat:** 32.0800°N **Lon:** -81.3851°W

**Ending Elevation:** 6 feet **Lat:** 31.9777°N **Lon:** -81.2880°W

**Restroom Facilities:**

- Mile 0** Ga. 204
- Mile 9** Savannah-Ogeechee Canal
- Mile 15** Kings Ferry

### **Point of Interest:**

**Mile 0—Ft. Stewart**—This Army base stretches along the west bank of the Ogeechee from Ga. 204 to the Canoochee River (you'll notice the U.S. Property signs along the bank). It is home to the Army's 3rd Infantry Division and Hunter Army Airfield. Covering 280,000 acres, it is the largest armor training base east of the Mississippi. It was established in 1940 during the build up to World War II, and the condemnation of property was not well received by the local population. An estimated 4,500 people were forced from their homes and offered below value prices for their land. Despite their pleas to Senators Walter F. George and Richard B. Russell to intervene, residents were rather quickly shuffled out of their homes. The federal government took ownership in March 1941 and by December, when the U.S. officially entered the war, most of the inhabitants had been removed. A *Pembroke Journal* editorial likely reflected the feelings of most: "It's going to be mighty hard on some of the people to sell out and move away from the old homestead... But even at that, think of how much better off we are than the poor, unfortunate people across the pond, walking down the road with everything in the world they possess, starving to death and being killed by the Germans."

**Mile 4.5—Ogeechee Tupelo Trees (*Nyssa ogechee*)**—Along the margins of the river here, you will likely notice an abundance of these trees which have inspired botanists, beekeepers and songwriters. They reach heights of 40 feet and sport bright, green oval-shaped leaves with pointed ends. In the spring, its blossoms resemble miniature sweet gum balls which when pollinated develop into clusters of olive-size fruits. In the late summer, these fruits become ripe and have a citrusy, lime-like juice. By fall they turn bright red. Famed botanist William Bartram first described the tree as he traveled through Georgia in the 1700s. He wrote in his journal: "The most northern settlement of this tree, yet known, is on the great Ogeechee River, where they are called Ogeechee Limes, and they are being sometimes used in their stead." The nectar from these trees is collected by bees and used to produce pure tupelo honey, prized because of its taste and because its high fructose content prevents it from granulating like other honeys. Beekeepers along Florida's Apalachicola have made a business out of this "gourmet" honey. In 1971, Van Morrison released "Tupelo Honey," a song that has become an iconic pop tune.

**Mile 5.1—Uncle Shed's Fish Camp & Ogeechee Boats**—A slough on river left is the site of this famous fish camp—immortalized in photographer Jack Leigh's coffee-table book, *The Ogeechee, A River and its People*. Like other fish camps, Uncle Shed's was a place where river lovers rented boats, bought bait and got on the river. The boats rented at Uncle Shed's and other Ogeechee fish camps were somewhat unusual. They featured a narrow stern where the outboard motor was mounted and a wide bow that provided room for the angler casting gill nets for shad (the opposite configuration of most johnboats built today). In the 1950s these vessels rented for \$1 a day at places like Uncle Shed's. The camp bears the name of Shedrick Jasper Dickerson, Sr. whose daughter, Bessie Dickerson Saxon, born in 1938, would become the camp's matriarch. She died in 2013.

**Mile 6.4—Marsh Grass**—On river left here is one of the most inland stands of spartina on the Ogeechee. Spartina, also known as saltwater cordgrass, is the primary plant of Georgia's coastal marshes. As the river draws closer to the coast, it becomes the dominant riverside plant. Georgia's coastal marshes cover 378,000 acres in a four-to-six-mile wide, 100-mile-long band behind the state's barrier islands. They serve as a critical nursery for important commercial fish and shellfish and buffer inland communities from damaging storms

**Mile 8.1—Ft. Argyle**—Near here on river right (opposite the homes on river left) are the remains of Ft. Argyle, a British colonial fort established in 1733, the same year that the Georgia colony was founded. The fort continued to serve as a buffer between the Spanish to south as well as hostile Native Americans until 1763. Though they never came under siege, the soldiers stationed at the fort patrolled the frontier on horseback, foot and in boats on the Ogeechee and were instrumental in repulsing an invasion by the Spanish at the Battle of Bloody Marsh on nearby St. Simon's Island. The soldiers also enforced frontier justice: After a man that murdered two Ft. Argyle settlers was executed, the soldiers hung his body at the entrance to Ogeechee Sound as a warning to other would be troublemakers. Archaeologist pinpointed the location of the fort in 1985 and have since completed several excavations.

**Mile 9.2—Ogeechee-Savannah Canal**—The mouth of this canal is up a narrow slough on river left. Completed around 1830, this thoroughfare connected Georgia's interior with the port of Savannah. When completed it was 16-miles long, 5-feet deep and 48-feet wide, and included several locks, one of which can be seen at the entrance to the canal. Rice, bricks, lumber and other products were transported up to Savannah from this point, and the canal played a vital role in the development of the city as a seaport. Nevertheless, the Canal was never a great commercial success. Competition from railroads doomed it to obsolescence, and it ceased operation in the late 1800s. Still, in the early 1900s canal backers lobbied Congress to explore revival of the project. As originally envisioned in the 1820s, the Canal would have continued from this point southwest to connect to the Altamaha River near the mouth of the Ohoopie River—a distance of 50 miles. As with today's linear highway projects, the main motivation for the ambitious undertaking was to save time and money. Engineers surveying the route explained, "Navigation of the Alatomaha (sic) is tedious, uncertain and expensive... the windings of the river are said to be so great as to render the distance by water compared to that by land nearly three to one."

**Mile 13.9 Canoochee River**—The Ogeechee's sister river runs 108 miles from near Swainsboro to this location. Some possible meanings of the Native American word for this river: "Graves are there" or "little ground."

**Mile 14—I-95**—Two bridges—one northbound, the other southbound, carry traffic on I-95 over the Ogeechee. 2,000 miles long and stretching from the tip of Florida to Maine, it is the busiest road in the country, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. Along this particular stretch, it is the conduit for goods coming into and out of the Port of Savannah, the largest single container port facility in North America. The port handles 25,000 tons of cargo daily and is serviced by as many as 9,000 trucks daily. 80 percent of these trucks wind up on I-95, taking goods to the interior and up and down the coast. It is the modern-day equivalent of the Ogeechee-Savannah Canal...but much louder and much faster.

**Mile 15.1—Love's Seafood**—Love's Seafood has occupied this location since 1949. The restaurant began as a fish camp where Fulton and Thelma Love sold bait and rented power boats (in those days, few people owned boats). When anglers returned from the river, Thelma fried up any fish for them and supplemented it with home-cooked vegetables. In those days, seven fish camps dotted this stretch of river, and the Ogeechee fishery, including a robust shad and sturgeon catch, supported dozens of families. In Love's early years, most of the fish served at the restaurant was harvested in local water. Love's gained notoriety in 1994 when it was "recast" as a strip club in the movie *Forrest Gump* where Jenny (Robin Wright) sings "Blowin' in The Wind" in the nude.

**Mile 15.2—Kings Ferry Bridge**—The U.S. 17 bridge and our final campsite marks the site of the first bridge that was constructed across the Ogeechee River. Built in 1795, it replaced a ferry at the site that began operation around 1760. The name Kings Ferry is a bit misleading as the King family did not acquire the property until the early 1800s after the bridge was already in place and apparently never operated a ferry at this location. Among the King family owners was Roswell King, who in the 1830s migrated with his family and nearly 80 slaves to a spot along the Chattahoochee River where he constructed a textile mill and founded what would become the town of Roswell.

