Ebenezer Creek Cotillion–Paddle Georgia 2023

June 30—Ebenezer Creek/Savannah River

Distance: 0-12 miles

Starting Elevation: 17 feet **32.379297, -81.181872**
Ending Elevation: 17 feet **32.379297, -81.181872**

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Ebenezer Landing
Mile 3	Tommy Long Boat Ramp
Mile 6	Long Bridge Boat Ramp

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Ebenezer Creek—A slow-moving blackwater creek of noted beauty, it has been compared by many to the Okefenokee Swamp. Designated a National Natural Landmark in 1976 by the National Parks Service, the creek corridor holds what is considered the best remaining cypress-gum swamp forest in the Savannah River basin. In 1981, the Georgia General Assembly designated the creek as a Georgia Scenic River, joining the Chattooga and Conasauga rivers as the only water bodies with such a designation. It is lined by towering, buttressed bald cypress, some of which are believed to be more than 1,000-years-old, as well as wildly twisted and thickly trunked tupelo trees. The creek also holds unique diminutive plants both in the water and overhead. Aquatic carnivorous bladderworts float on the creek's surface while in overhanging trees epiphytic green fly orchids can be found. Beginning in 1734, the creek was home to a group of German-speaking Protestant immigrants who fled religious persecution in Europe, and during the Civil War it was the scene of a horrific tragedy that led to a politically-motivated proclamation that might have altered the face of the South and race relations had it lasted. On Dec. 9, 1864, as the Union Army moved south to capture Savannah, 14,000 soldiers crossed the creek on pontoon bridges. They were followed by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of recently liberated slaves, but before they could cross the rain-swollen creek, army engineers dismantled the temporary bridges leaving the "camp followers" stranded on the opposite bank as Confederate cavalry closed in. Col. Charles Kerr of the 126th Illinois Cavalry then witnessed what he called "a scene the like of which I pray my eyes may never see again." Men, women and children rushed into the creek's icy waters attempting to gain the opposite bank only to drown in the deep water. Eye witness accounts of the incident reached northern newspapers and leaders in Washington, eliciting public outrage at Union commander William T. Sherman. The political pressure prompted Sherman to convene an unprecedented meeting in Savannah on Jan. 12, 1865. At the meeting Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton asked a group of 20 Black leaders led by 67-year-old Garrison Frazier, a free Baptist minister, what the freedmen needed following the war. To a man, the group requested land. Four days later, Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15 which set aside 400,000 acres stretching along the Atlantic Coast from Charleston, South Carolina to the St. Johns River in Florida, including Georgia's barrier islands, for distribution to newly freed slaves. Each family received 40 acres and Sherman later agreed to lend them Army-owned mules, thus began the "40 acres and a mule" program. By June 1865, 40,000 freedmen had settled on what was called "Sherman's Land" including 1,000 on Skidaway Island. President Andrew Johnson overturned the field order in fall 1865.

Mile 0.2—Aquatic Vegetation—Ebenezer is home to an abundance of aquatic vegetation. In the 1980s, this growth began alarming residents and creek users who feared that increased nutrient levels from upstream land use changes and the Springfield sewage treatment plant were dramatically changing the character of the creek. Water quality studies conducted in the 1990s resulted in several recommendations to deal with the issue, including protecting land in the creek's watershed, eliminating the discharge from the sewage treatment plant and altering releases at upstream Savannah River dams so that Ebenezer's flow could more easily enter the river and "flush" out nutrients more regularly.

Mile 0.6—Log Boom—Paralleling the south side of the creek here for more than 100 yards are wood pilings that once supported a logging railroad built by Pierpont Manufacturing around 1902. According to a local history recorded by the Gnann family, upon arriving at this location, logs transported on the train's log carts were dumped into the creek's deep water, gathered into log rafts and then floated down river to Pierpont's riverfront facility in Savannah. Pierpont made boxes, crates, drums and barrels used to ship everything from cabbage to cotton oil and operated its Savannah facility into the 1970s.

Mile 0.7—Bridge Pilings—Here cypress pilings—likely dating to prior to the Civil War—mark the former site of a bridge that transported travelers on the Old River Road. Originally blazed in the 1730s, it was one of Colonial Georgia's leading thoroughfares and the first "highway" connecting Savannah and Augusta. It is believed that the creek was bridged here as early as 1751. It thus became important militarily during the American Revolution and was at times defended by both British and Patriots using redoubts on the south side of the creek. By the mid-1800s, the bridge became property of Jerusalem Church which benefitted from the tolls collected from travelers. During the Civil War as Union troops marched to Savannah along the road, Major James A. Connolly of the 123rd Illinois Infantry reported unfavorably on the road's narrow course through the swamp: "To cross the creek we had to pass through at least a mile of the most gloomy, dismal cypress swamp I ever saw, on a narrow causeway, just wide enough for a wagon to drive along. If the enemy had discovered our movement and had planted a piece of artillery in the road to rake that causeway while we were on it, they could have killed or wounded three fourths of the men in the division, and we should have been utterly helpless to defend against it. If there were no other road to approach Savannah except by this one over Ebenezer Creek, five thousand rebels could defend the city against the world." As the Confederate Army retreated toward Savannah, they destroyed the bridge, forcing Union Army engineers to rebuild it…only to destroy it to prevent liberated slaves and the Confederate cavalry from following them southward. It was here that the "Ebenezer Creek Massacre" described above occurred. After the Civil War, the road fell into disuse and north-south travelers began using a route further west that passed through Springfield.

Mile 0.8—Powerlines—Overhead powerlines here mark the upstream limits of a 275-acre parcel of land that borders the creek on the north bank all the way to the Savannah River. The land was preserved in 2014 through the work of the Trust for Public Land which transferred to the property to the City of Springfield. The parcel protects two miles of creek and river front property.

Mile 1.—Bridge Pilings—These pilings mark the location of a Pierpont Manufacturing Co. logging railroad bridge dating to the early 1900s. Logs harvested on the north side of the creek were brought across this trestle and then taken to the log boom downstream on the south side of the creek.

Mile 2.2—Thompson Island—Just upstream beyond the house on the south side of the creek sits this 18-acre parcel of land surrounded by a sweeping bend in the creek. The property is owned by the City of Springfield which acquired it through a donation made by the Scott Thompson family to the Georgia Conservancy in 2013. The acquisition is part of a larger project led by the City of Springfield to create a "greenway" stretching from Springfield to the Savannah River.

Mile 3—Tommy Long Boat Ramp—This Effingham County public boat landing encompasses some 10 acres and provides a parking area, pit toilets and interpretive signs detailing the events of Dec. 9, 1864.

Mile 5.7—Hollow Cypress—The ultimate Ebenezer Creek photo op! A massive cypress here includes a hollow trunk into which you can insert most of your boat. As cypress trees age, they can become hollow while still remaining alive. These cavities provide important habitat for wood ducks, barred owls, bees, and especially, bats, like the rare Rafinesques big-eared bats. Ebenezer is home to one state champion bald cypress tree.

Mile 6 –Long Bridge Boat Ramp—Just beyond the bridge on the south side of the creek is the Long Bridge Boat Ramp with a parking area and pit toilets. A bridge has spanned the creek here since around 1907 when workers used a pile driver to hammer 152 spiked cypress posts into the creek bottom to support a 375-foot-long wooden bridge that came to be known as Long Bridge. The bridge connected the communities of Rincon and Stillwell.