Purysburg Polka–Paddle Georgia 2023

July 1—Savannah River/Abercorn Creek

Distance: 17 miles

Starting Elevation: 17 feet **32.379297, -81.181872**
Ending Elevation: 7 feet **32.258754, -81.178143**

Restroom Facilities: **Mile 0** Ebenezer Landing **Mile 5.8** Becks Ferry Landing **Mile 10.8** Millstone Landing **Mile 16** Abercorn Landing

Points of Interest:

Mile 0.1—Red Bluff/New Ebenezer—On river, is Red Bluff, a high, stony-based bluff, atop which the Salzburgers, German-speaking Protestants who came to Georgia fleeing religious persecution in Europe, settled in 1736. Two years earlier the group of more than 70 settled several miles upstream on Ebenezer Creek but that locale proved inhospitable. Thus, they removed to this more favorable location. Itinerant pastor, John Wesley, described the town as it appeared in 1737: "The industry of this people is quite surprising. Their sixty huts are neatly and regularly built; and all the little spots of ground between them, improved to the best advantage…one would scarce think it possible for a handful of people to have done in one year." The Salzburgers' primary industry was the production of silk and by 1770s, the community, which then numbered in the hundreds, was shipping more than 400 pounds of raw silk to England annually. Their prosperity enabled the construction, in 1769, of Jerusalem Lutheran Church, a brick structure that today is the oldest church building in the state. After the American Revolution, the town entered a steady decline. In 1855, the church's pastor Rev. P.A. Strobel described the ghost town: "The town has gone almost entirely to ruins…The old church, however, stands in bold relief upon an open lawn…Except on the Sabbath, when the descendants of the Saltzburgers go up to their temple to worship…the stillness which reigns around Ebenezer is seldom broken, save by the warbling of the birds, the occasional transit of a steamer or the murmurs of the Savannah."

Mile 1.4—Big Keiffer Point—Here, the river splits, the right channel heading west and the left channel charting a more direct course to the sea. This is one of dozens of man-made cuts created by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in late 1950s and early 1960s to "improve navigation" and shorten the distance between Savannah and Augusta. Downstream, where the oxbow reconnects with the cut is a 250-foot-long navigational weir

Mile 1.9—Plant McIntosh—On river right is the water intake for this Georgia Power Company natural gas and low-sulfur diesel fuel power generating facility. The company is permitted to pump up to 130 million gallons a day, water that it uses in two natural gas-powered, combined-cycle generating units. From1982 until 2018, the plant operated as a coal-burning facility that left behind some 90,000 cubic yards of coal ash, containing pollutants like arsenic, lead and mercury. Georgia Power dewatered the facility's ash pond and excavated the ash, removing it to lined, permitted landfills. Immediately downstream is the facility's water discharge consisting mostly of water used in the power generation and cooling process.

Mile 2.6—Georgia Pacific Savannah River Mill—On river right is the water intake and wastewater discharge for this facility that uses up to 35 million gallons of the Savannah daily to convert pine trees and recycled paper into toilet tissue, paper towels and napkins. The 75-acre mill site, located about two miles west, began operation in 1986 and remains Effingham County's largest private employer with more than 1,000 workers.

Mile 2.7—Oxygen Injection System—On river right is the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers oxygen injection system. The facility pumps water from the river, injects it with oxygen and then releases it via large underwater diffusers. It is designed to deliver up to 28,000 pounds of oxygen to the river daily and operates between June and September when oxygen levels drop in the summer heat. This artificial lung was required as mitigation for the Savannah Harbor Expansion Project (SHEP). The SHEP was completed in 2022 after more than seven years of dredging to bring the Port of Savannah shipping channel to a depth of 47 feet from 42 and accommodate larger container ships. The Port of Savannah is now the second busiest port on the Atlantic coast, but that status has come with costs. Low oxygen levels harm aquatic wildlife, including federally protected Atlantic and shortnose sturgeons. Initial tests of this and a sister facility within the harbor showed that the injection system is successful, but oxygen levels in the harbor remain dangerously low. The two injection systems cost taxpayers $100 million with annual operation costs of about $3 million.

Mile 3.6—Flat Ditch Point—On river right is a narrow entry to this oxbow lake that extends west and then north for nearly a mile. This oxbow was created in 1962 when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredged a 1,000-foot-long channel across the neck of Flat Ditch Point.

Mile 3.8—Bear Creek—On river right is the entrance to this "creek," a narrow channel of the river that winds some 8 miles through bottomland forest to Abercorn Creek. An extensive rock weir and then a 1000-foot-long bulkhead make up the bulk of this $4.3 million project completed in 2002, which aimed to fix a problem of our own making. When the Corps of Engineers dredged a cut off across the neck of Hickory Bend in 1962 to improve river navigation, the project decreased the volume of the river directed to Bear Creek, reducing flooding of the wetlands surrounding Bear Creek, which serve as important nurseries for juvenile fish. The cut also resulted in declining water quality at the city of Savannah's drinking water intake on Abercorn Creek. Thus was born this infrastructure to redirect more of the Savannah to Bear Creek.

Mile 4.4—Coleman Lake—On river left, this oxbow lake extends north more than a mile into the Savannah's bottomland swamp forest.

Mile 5.5—Fox Lake & BJWSA Canal—On river left is the entrance to this oxbow lake and the entrance to a canal that feeds two Beaufort-Jasper Water & Sewer Authority water treatment plants with up to 39 million gallons of Savannah River water daily. The authority's Purrysburg treatment facility is one mile from the river, but the canal continues another 17 miles to a second treatment facility, even spanning the Great Swamp on a water bridge.

Mile 5.8—Beck's Ferry—In the late 1700s, this spot was known as Zubly's Ferry and was owned by noted preacher and widely published pamphleteer John Zubly, the first pastor at Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah. A representative from Georgia in the Second Continental Congress, his influential essays leading up to the Declaration of Independence supported the colonies in their disputes with the English crown, but Zubly also believed strongly that the colonies should not break from the motherland. Remaining a loyalist, he was ultimately branded a traitor and banished from Georgia. On July 1, 1776, a mob of patriots stormed his home in Savannah and threw his 2,000-book library (one of the largest in the colonies) into the river. By the dawn of the 1800s, a Rev. John Beck operated the ferry. A preacher and rice planter, Beck was something of a "colorful" character. After preaching a sermon at a Savannah church, a parishioner voiced his disapproval of his sermon in "vulgar" language. Wrote Henry Lucien Beck in his memoirs: "The Rev. John alighted from his coach with the horsewhip in hand. He removed his coat and threw it on the ground with this comment: "Lie there divinity while I chastise humanity" and preceded to horsewhip the man until he begged for mercy."

Mile 9—Meyer Lake—On river left is the entrance to this oxbow lake that extends north into the floodplain nearly a mile. More than 900 acres of land surrounding the lake was purchased in 2021 for $3.4 million by the Low Country Land Trust with $105,000 provided by the City of Savannah in recognition of the importance of protecting water quality by protecting property upstream of the city's drinking water intake.

Mile 9.5—Purysburg—On river left a series of riverfront homes marks the location of Purysburg, an early South Carolina frontier town settled by French and German speaking Swiss colonists in 1732. As Ebenezer was to the English colony of Georgia, Purysburg was to South Carolina—a frontier bulwark against threats from the Spanish and French and their Native American allies. It was not, however, well situated to sustainable living. By 1736, more than 100 houses had been built in the settlement and it boasted a population of 450, but the floodplain forest that surrounded it was not well suited for agriculture and instead cultivated the mosquitoes that spread malaria. The town never thrived, but persisted as it served as a primary river crossing between Savannah and Charleston. President George Washington visited Purysburg in a triumphant tour of the southern states in the spring of 1791. He was greeted in Purysburg by dignitaries from Savannah who escorted the president down the Savannah in "a handsome 8 oared barge rowed by 8 American Captains."

Mile 10.7—Millstone Landing—On river left here is this landing with boat ramp, floating dock, picnic area and parking area.

Mile 11.9—Lady Washington Point—Martha Washington did not accompany President Washington on his 1791 trip, but it's quite possible this oxbow was named in her honor. The name appears on circa-1838 maps. Just downstream of this point, at low tide on river left, can be seen the remains of a wooden vessel. On June 10, 1859, boilers on the steamer John G. Lawton exploded, sending passengers and crew sailing into riverside woods and marshes. According to news reports, one of the nine victims to die in the explosion was found "embedded in the marsh, head downwards, to the hips, some seventy or eighty yards from the spot where the explosion occurred." It is unknown whether the wooden remains present today are those of the John G. Lawton.

Mile 12.8—Gum Stump Point—On river right is this oxbow that holds within it a large wooden shipwreck measuring some 160-feet in length.

Mile 14.4—Big Collis Creek—On river right this creek extends into the Savannah River National Wildlife Refuge. Between 1782 and 1787, these secluded islands attracted some 100 former slaves that had fought with the British during the Revolutionary War. Refusing to be enslaved, the "maroons" fled to these inhospitable lands and built a fortified village, fought off militia, raided nearby plantations and survived, if not flourished. In May 1787, local militia overcame a maroon encampment along Bear Creek that contained 21 houses, cleared land cultivated with rice and potatoes and was surrounded by a four-foot-high stockade. Dozens of the maroons were killed and some captured, including "Captain Lewis," one of the group's leaders. He was quickly convicted of robbery and murder, executed, and had his severed head displayed on a spike overlooking the river in Savannah as a deterrent to any future slave uprisings. It is believed that the majority of the Savannah River maroons survived and escaped to Native American territory to the south and west.

Mile 17—Savannah Water Intake—Some 2 miles up Abercorn creek is the city of Savannah's drinking water intake and Abercorn Landing. In 1948 the city built a raw water intake here because withdrawals from the underlying Floridan Aquifer—which began in 1887—couldn't keep up with demand. The city still gets 70 percent of its supply from groundwater, but surface water has become increasingly important as a hedge against saltwater intrusion—both in underlying groundwater and surface water. Too much pumping from the Floridan Aquifer led to the intrusion of saltwater, a trend that threatens to contaminate the water supply for millions. In response environmental regulators in the early 2000s imposed moratoriums on groundwater withdrawals in critical areas. Thus, Savannah's intake here has taken on a greater role. But, thanks to the state's biggest economic engine—the Port of Savannah—and the looming crisis of sea level rise--even this seven-decade-old intake structure may be at risk. Deepening of the Savannah harbor coupled with rising sea levels (nine inches at the mouth of the Savannah since 1935)—has increased the likelihood that extreme high tide events could bring saltwater into Abercorn Creek. Thus, in 2018, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed construction of a $43.5 million, off-stream reservoir that stores up to 100 million gallons of drinking water for Savannah. It serves as an emergency reserve if saltwater ever creeps far enough inshore to threaten Abercorn Creek.