

The Forks Flamenco—Paddle Georgia 2024

June 16—Oconee/Altamaha Rivers

Distance: 12.4 miles Oconee River Mile 2 to Altamaha River Mile 123.5

Starting Elevation: 85 feet 31.982145, -82.551415 **Ending Elevation:** 76 feet 31.966643, -82.428893

Pit Stops: Mile 2—Dead River Road Mile 131.8—Uvalda Landing Mile 131.4—Towns Bluff Mile 123.4—Gray's Landing

Points of Interest:

Mile 2—Bells Ferry—Long used as a crossing by Native Americans, in the late 1700s and early 1800s, a ferry was established at this location. In January 1815, the site was used by Gen. David Blackshear and his 800 men as they raced to the Georgia coast to prevent invasion by British troops in the waning days of the War of 1812. The Oconee played an important role in the troop's supply lines. In a letter to Georgia Gov. Peter Early, Blackshear urged the governor to employ the river and send needed supplies so that they might intercept them at this location: "We have been much neglected by that department in small rations. Provisions and forage might be sent down the Oconee, and for which we shall suffer if we do not get a supply in a few days."

Mile 1.4—Altamaha River Scenic Easements—On river right here is the beginning of a 300-foot-wide conservation easement that preserves the river corridor for more than a mile to the Oconee's confluence with the Ocmulgee where the rivers become the Altamaha. This is one of many parcels encompassing more than 165,000 acres of land that public and private efforts have placed under permanent protection along the Altamaha River since the 1970s.

Mile 0.7—Old Boat Yard—Where today fish camps, cabins and homes line the land between Three Rivers Road and the river (on river left), in the 1800s a boatyard could be found here...and, on occasion, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers snag boats.

Mile 134—The Forks—Here, the Oconee collides headlong with the Ocmulgee, forming Georgia's largest river—the Altamaha. The Altamaha is the third largest contributor of freshwater to the Atlantic Ocean on North America's eastern shore. It flows 137 miles from here to its mouth between Wolf Island and Little St. Simons Island. As the rivers gather at The Forks, so have people. Among the most famous to reside or do business near here is Mary Musgrove, the Pocahontas of Georgia. Around 1745, Musgrove and her third husband, the Rev. Thomas Bosomworth, established a trading post in this vicinity. In the days when rafhthands floated timber rafts from the upper reaches of the Ocmulgee and Oconee, the Forks came to be known as "Sunday" for the wider, less treacherous Altamaha brought a measure of rest to the hands who had been navigating the twisting, narrow passages of the smaller rivers for several days. Janet Mauney, in a May 1940 edition of the *Atlanta Constitution*, documented the memories of old rafhthands: "On approaching the "forks" the colored raft hand always sang a song of their own composition entitled, "I See Sunday."

Mile 132.8—Georgia & Florida Railway—This abandoned railroad bridge with bascule draw was built in 1909 at a cost of about \$140,000 to carry freight and passengers on the Georgia & Florida Railway.

Mile 132.7—Powerlines

Mile 132.1—Neil Lee Gillis Bridge—In 2021, the latest version of this bridge was completed and the original circa-1952 bridge was dismantled. The bridge is named for the patriarch of one of South Georgia's most influential political families. Neil Lee Gillis is known as the father of Treutlen County as he campaigned tirelessly for its creation in 1917. Voters awarded him for his efforts by electing him as the first senator to represent the newly created county. His son, grandson and great grandson would all serve in state government as legislators, judges and officers of the state highway board. Prior to construction of the bridge, the Towns Bluff Ferry moved travelers across the river here. The ferry was described by Florence M. Pettee in a 1920 edition of *Motor Travel* magazine: "Long festoons of swaying Spanish moss hang from the arching trees, adding an exotic touch to the landscape...The ferry resides on the south side and is summoned by making the woods resound by great ax blows against the inviting saw blade hanging from a sentinel tree. A wholly river-worthy raft towed by a gamey little motor boat holds its course across this ambitious river."

Mile 131.8—Uvalda Landing

Mile 131.4—Town Bluff Park & Heritage Center—On river right here is a boat ramp providing access to the Jeff Davis County-maintained Towns Bluff Park and Heritage Center with restrooms in the campground. The park is home to a river history museum which will be open during our passage from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Mile 129.9—Half Moon Cut Through—On river left here is a cut through that provides a short cut, eliminating an oxbow to the east known as Half Moon Bluff. On Jan. 9, 1866 near this site the steamer Asher Ayres, on her first journey down river from Hawkinsville loaded with more than 1000 bales of cotton and some 60 passengers, caught fire and was totally destroyed. The *Savannah Republican* newspaper carried eyewitness accounts of the harrowing fire: "As soon as it was discovered there was no hope of saving the steamer, the passengers busied themselves by throwing overboard bales of cotton and jumping in the river after them. In this way many lives were saved...Mothers frantic with despair sought some avenue of escape for terrified children. Devoted husbands, blanched with fear, struggled to protect their horror stricken wives." Seven people died in the disaster: "one negro woman, with her three children, two negro men and a Portuguese boy, named Johnny, deck hand, were lost," reported the *Daily Constitutionalist* in Augusta. At low water embedded in the river banks near here are the rusted remains of what appears to be part of a steam engine, whether it belonged to the Asher Ayres is anyone's guess.

Mile 127.1—Hall's Ferry Landing—On river left is this historic landing, that was originally the site of a ferry. In 1820, a year before his death, Lewis Hall, Jr. secured from the Georgia General Assembly the right to establish a ferry near this location. A Revolutionary War veteran who was held prisoner during the conflict, Hall and his family moved from North Carolina to Georgia in the late 1790s. According to a family history, Hall is notable for siring 18 children by two wives in his 68 years—the last one born just two years before his death in 1821. Ferriage privileges were highly valuable in this era. Though authorized by the state, ferry operators kept the tolls which in 1820 were set at \$1 for a wagon pulled by four horses—the equivalent of an \$18 toll today.

Mile 124.0—Milligan's Bluff—On river left here is a high bluff that in the early 1840s was the site of a fantastical tale of treasure. Recorded in the *Macon Messenger*, the veracity of the report remains in question: "The circumstances are related that a man by the name of John Mazo discovered three dollars, which had become exposed by the blowing up of a tree. He commenced examining the earth below, and the coin continued to appear, until he had exhumed...Forty-five Thousand Spanish Dollars...the latest date on the coin was over 160 years since. The place where they were found had the appearance of an ancient fortification." Spanish missionaries were known to have travelled up the Altamaha from the coast in the late 1500s.

Mile 123.4—Gray's Landing—This landing on river left traces its name to Daniel Levi Gray, who was among the earliest settlers of what was then Tattnall County. Though the Gray name has stuck to this landing, the Mann family also played a prominent role in the history of this locale. William Mann Sr. and his family came to the region in the first decade of the 1800s, establishing a ferry and a later a sawmill. In 1890, the landing was home to "Henry Mann's Sawmill" as well as a gristmill and store. Over the years the spot has been the scene of much tragedy and drama. During the height of the river's rafting days, in 1893, Charley Johnson, a fugitive, hitched a ride from here on a log raft after murdering a rival for a woman's affection. He was ultimately captured, and sentenced to death. According to newspaper accounts, the execution attracted a crowd of 6,000, for the doomed man was an itinerant preacher who was permitted to preach his own funeral sermon and lead the crowd in singing "Canaan's Happy Shore" before he was hanged. In 1930, 70-year-old S.S. Mincey, a black leader of the Republican Party in nearby Mt. Vernon, was drug from his home by "a band of masked and robed men" and carried near Gray's Landing where he was beaten, whipped and left to die. Newspaper accounts reported that "most of the skin was lashed off the negro's back." Mincey died the next day. Though there was public outcry, no one was ever prosecuted for the lynching. Finally, in 1956, five people on a boat picnicking excursion drowned here when their boat capsized. Among the victims were three children. A monument overlooking the river at the landing memorializes the dead. Today, the landing is home to Benton Lee's Steakhouse, a legendary restaurant and the only one on the river above Darien. Sadly, for us, it is closed on Sundays.