

Ohoopie Whoopie—Paddle Georgia 2024

June 17—Ohoopie River

Distance: 13.5 miles Ohoopie River Mile 13 to Tattnall County Landing

Starting Elevation: 77 feet **32.009464**, **-82.155330** **Ending Elevation:** 52 feet **31.897280**, **-82.109204**

Pit Stops: Mile 13—Ga. 147 Boat Ramp Mile 7.4—Rocky Range Road Mile +0.5—Tattnall County Landing

Points of Interest:

Mile 12.3—Ryals Bridge—On river right, a concrete piling marks the location of this historic bridge that spanned the river beginning in the 1800s. The piling dates to around 1908 when the first steel truss bridge was built here, but that structure didn't last long. High water in 1911 toppled it, necessitating a rebuild in 1915 that cost Tattnall taxpayers \$5000. By the late 1940s the bridge was abandoned. Aside from getting locals over the river, Ryals Bridge connected the community to it. It was a place for 4-H camps and school outings one of which was recorded in the *Tattnall Journal* in 1912: "Mrs. Cecil Woodcliffe, the attractive teacher of the Shiloh School near Reidsville, together with her pupils and a number of friends, enjoyed a delightful picnic on the Ohoopie River near Ryals bridge last Wednesday... The merry school kids romped and played in the woods in a light-hearted, happy manner while many of the older ones spent their time fishing along the banks, and were greatly repaid by a bountiful supply of fish which were cooked in true "camp style" and ready to serve along with the sumptuous dinner which was spread 'neath the grand old shady oaks."

Mile 12—Powerlines.

Mile 11.7—Water Pennywort—On river right (and at many places along the Ohoopie) is a large floating mat of this aquatic plant that sports leathery, deep-green circular-shaped leaves. During the spring and summer, it blooms with small clusters of star-shaped flowers that can be white, yellowish-green or purple. For the next 1.5 mile on river left are numerous dwellings.

Mile 10.2—Oxbow Lake—On river left is an entrance to an extensive oxbow lake.

Mile 9.7—Strickland Bluff—On river left is this high (for the Ohoopie) bluff that bears the name of one of Tattnall County's early leaders, Henry Solomon Strickland, who in the antebellum period owned some 5,000 acres along the river here. In 1860, documents show that he farmed this land with 38 enslaved persons. He was elected to the state senate from the area in 1840, and in 1861 he represented Tattnall County at the Georgia Secession Convention, at which delegates voted to secede from the Union, leading to the Civil War. Though Strickland was among the largest landowners and slave owners in the county, he feared that war would ruin Georgia. Both he and Benjamin Brewton, Tattnall's other delegate to the convention, argued against secession. Strickland died less than a year later, never to see his dire prediction come true. For all the cotton that Strickland undoubtedly grew, his largest "crop" might have been his children. He married three times, producing 20 offspring in his 70 years. His last wife died in 1859, and at the occasion of her death he penned a heart-wrenching poem, the first two verses of which read: "On the Ohoopie banks I stand; My Tears are falling to the sand. For my companion is called away; On, never, never to return. She was a wife when in distress, a mother to the motherless, but God saw best for us to part, and now it grieves me to my heart."

Mile 7.4—Rocky Range Road—On river right is a river access at the end of Rocky Range Road. This is the southernmost point of state-owned property associated with Rogers Correctional Institute and Georgia State Prison and as such is frequented by the fishing (and other) public. The Ohoopie is especially known for its panfish fishery—redbreast, bluegills and redear sunfish—and through the years state and local game laws have attempted to manage and preserve this fishery. Along this section of the Ohoopie in the mid 1900s, local authorities had their hands full rooting out "dynamiters." In 1948 officers caught three "anglers" with 25 pounds of fish and a dozen sticks of dynamite. The three offenders were each fined \$300 (the equivalent of \$3,500 in 2021 dollars).

Mile 7.2—Battle Creek—On river left is this creek whose name reflects a Revolutionary War skirmish. It was here that Patriot troops under the command of Capt. William Cone attacked an outlaw band of Tories led by Col. Daniel McGirth, a one-time Patriot who defected to the British side and spent much of 1781 raiding and stealing from homesteads along the Altamaha. After one such raid, McGirth and his troops camped near here, unaware that Capt. Cone's force of 140 men was in close pursuit. As recounted in the *Heritage of Tattnall County*, "As the Tories were preparing for camp a rain set in and made conditions difficult. Wishing to preserve the element of surprise, Cone sent forward a scout, who noiselessly killed the Tory sentry... A fierce skirmish ensued, during which the British were defeated, 12 or 13 enemy troops perished, with the remainder being driven into and across the Ohoopie."

Mile 6.3—Shoal—At low water a small shoal appears here.

Mile 5.7—Bluff & Mink—On river left is a high, wooded bluff, but it is highly unlikely that a mink will be seen at this picturesque site. The sleek, dark brown, long-tailed weasels that grow to lengths of about two feet and weigh 2-3-pounds can be found throughout Georgia, though at one time they were more abundant. In 1903, the *Tattnall Journal* reported on two minks that were killed along the Ohoopie: "These little animals are destructive to chickens, one mink has been known to kill a half dozen chickens in one night. They were a few years ago very numerous in the county and gave the farmers a great deal of trouble, but we are glad to learn that they have about disappeared and it is very rare that one is ever captured now." Mink populations have declined nationwide since the mid-1900s; wildlife biologists attribute that in part to the presence of industrial pollutants. A top-tier predator that feeds heavily on fish, crayfish and frogs, mink are susceptible to accumulating toxins, such as mercury, which are known to contaminate Ohoopie and Altamaha river fish. Mercury has been detected in high levels from mink carcasses examined from this part of the state.

Mile 2.5 Cow Ford Bridge—Humans (and cows) have been crossing the river here at least since the 1700s when Colonial-era "ranchers" grazed cattle in this area. The Hencart Road, which crossed the river here, was an important trade road from Georgia's coastal settlements near present-day Richmond Hill into the Creek Nation to the west. By the early 1800s the crossing was well used. The current bridge was completed in 1964 and in 1965, the Georgia General Assembly dedicated the bridge in memory of native sons J. Cliff Kennedy and Rev. Reed B. Purcell. Purcell was a fisher of men...and fish. He was a well-known Baptist minister and a noted shad fisherman. At one time, his family ran a restaurant at Cow Ford. In the 1800s and early 1900s when American shad were still widely considered a culinary treat and when they could be found in abundance on the Altamaha and Ohoopie rivers, the run of the Ohoopie from Cow Ford to the river's mouth (then just 2 miles) was a center of activity during the early spring shad spawning runs.

Mile 0.5—Rush's Fish Camp—On river left here is the end of Tattnall County Road 537. The area surrounding the mouth of the Ohoopie was a locally popular fishing hole, especially in the late winter and early spring when shad made their annual spawning runs up the Altamaha and Ohoopie. Locals who owned land along this stretch took advantage of the fishery by opening fish camps. Among the best known was Dewey Rush's which in the 1950s offered rental boats at \$1 a day and sold crickets for one cent each. Rush, who represented the area in the General Assembly during the 1960s, dutifully used his position of influence to aid his community (and his business). In 1969, he convinced fellow legislators to extend the shad season 15 days because of "low water and extremely cold and rainy weather." "It would be a great help to shad fisherman," he told his colleagues.

Mile 0.0—Ohoopie Oxbow—Here the Ohoopie devolves into a labyrinth of narrow channels. This spot was once the true mouth of the Ohoopie as the river met the Altamaha at the height of the northern end of a nearly 2-mile-long looping oxbow. The Ohoopie, for its part, seemed satisfied with this relationship, but the Altamaha had other plans. During the later half of the 1900s, the big river began carving a new path, cutting across the spit of land forming this oxbow and creating a vast oxbow lake and wetland where a river once flowed. The narrow willow and river birch-lined channels are enchanting as they wind in multiple directions, leaving travelers to choose the best route. To reach Tattnall Landing 0.5 mile downstream bear to the left.

Mile +0.5—Tattnall County Landing—Located on river left, this landing was gifted to Tattnall County by Georgia Pacific in 1964, and it soon became a popular spot for anglers and community gatherings. In 1968, candidates in the Democratic Primary election planned a community fish fry at the park and in the pages of the *Tattnall Journal* urged all "interested citizens, interested voters and fish eaters" to attend: "Bring your pastor, your wife and children. There will be no alcoholic beverages on the premises and no political speeches." According to local reports, it was a huge success, attracting nearly 1,000 people.